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Did Not Finish: Doctoral Attrition in Higher Education and Student Affairs

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DID NOT FINISH: DOCTORAL ATTRITION IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND STUDENT AFFAIRS

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ABSTRACT

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Most students begin doctoral programs fully intending on completing the terminal degree. However, nearly half of the students who begin a doctoral program do not complete their degree. Attrition, or a decline in the number of students enrolled from the beginning to the end of a doctoral program, occurs throughout the degree. Some attrition is to be expected, and can be healthy. However, students may also choose to depart for negative reasons. Doctoral attrition is a relatively recent consideration in the literature, and previous literature had not considered the unique nature of higher education and student affairs programs.

This dissertation study uses attribution theory to consider the research question: To what do people who voluntarily depart from doctoral programs in higher education attribute their departure? Through interviews of fifteen participants who chose to leave their doctoral programs, I developed four themes that led to the decision to depart: inflexibility of the degree, incongruence between program and participant goals, lack of advising and mentoring, and personal factors. In addition, I briefly address the impact of departure on the participants. In the discussion and implications section, I consider the role of attribution theory in the participants' recollection about their departure, including locus of control, stability, and controllability. Further, I provide considerations and best practices for prospective and current students, higher education and student affairs

programs, and graduate schools, including practical application of reference material and possible staffing considerations. Finally, I provide future directions for research on the important topic of doctoral attrition.

Key Words: Doctoral Attrition; Higher Education and Student Affairs; Attribution Theory

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My journey to complete my doctorate has been long and fraught with a variety of obstacles. It is no mistake that my dissertation is entitled "DNF," a commonly used running term meaning Did Not Finish that is often used in reference to a runner who did not finish a marathon they began. As "it's a marathon, not a sprint," is a phrase often used when talking about the doctoral experience, it seemed especially apt in this realm.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The doctoral degree is generally considered the highest terminal academic degree in the United States (Gardner & Mendoza, 2010). Doctoral study can be rewarding, both personally and professionally. Learning new concepts, making meaning out of data, creating new knowledge – it is often exhilarating. Doctoral study also can be exhausting. Time spent away from family and friends, time spent on thinking and writing, writing and thinking – when I would much rather clean my house or bake – and now that I think of things I would rather be doing - I have always wanted to learn how to crochet. As a doctoral student, I am no different than many others; there have been times I have considered leaving the doctoral program. I have found myself feeling like an imposter among my peers, who seem to have everything together. I have watched other members of my cohort complete the degree, seemingly with an ease that seems out of reach for me. I have considered my future goals, and I often wonder if those goals truly require the additional certification a doctorate provides. I, perhaps like many others, came into my doctoral program sure that I wanted to become a tenured faculty member in a graduate higher education preparatory program. However, since I began my program, I have returned to academic advising, the functional area which initially drew me to the field of higher education. I, again, like many other doctoral students, have found myself

ensconced in an internal debate regarding whether to finish the degree that I initially saw as leading to a tenured faculty position, or to re-frame and consider the ways I could use a doctoral degree in advising.

After failing my first attempt at comprehensive exams, I found myself paralyzed in fear; not sure how to move forward, but not willing to stay behind. It took quite a few years to feel confident again in my skills and abilities as a researcher, and to find the passion again for doctoral study. I have also felt as though I have to wade through university bureaucracy to prove I should be allowed to complete my degree. In a few conversations about my proposed topic with friends and colleagues, I mentioned I was interested in understanding doctoral attrition. The response has been fascinating to me. I have had multiple colleagues respond they knew someone who was looking at that topic, but that person did not finish the degree. Through my research, I believe I have gained some understanding of my colleagues who persist, and those who leave the program, which continues to push me toward learning more. Because of my own experiences, I have a vested interest in understanding why people leave doctoral programs and how that experience shaped them.

Students pursue the doctoral degree with the best of intentions to complete; yet, this does not mean they understand the rigors of doctoral study compared to bachelor's and master's education (Gardner, 2009b). They want to become a faculty member or perhaps pursue job opportunities outside of academia. Specifically, those intending to pursue a doctorate in higher education and student affairs may aspire to be a director of an office at a large university, dean of students, faculty, or chief student affairs officer – perhaps even president of a university. These students may feel a doctoral degree will

help them to achieve these goals, or hiring institutions may require the doctorate for positions in which they are interested. However, many students do not fully understand doctoral education and the steps they will go through to be called "Dr. Smith," or the reality of a faculty or administrative career. Additionally, many students focus their post-doctorate employment options in higher education with little understanding of career options outside of the traditional academy. Some students may pursue a doctoral degree because it seems like a logical next step after finishing a previous degree, and often because they enjoy being in the classroom. Many professionals in higher education also strongly value lifelong learning, or may be influenced by colleagues seeking advanced education (Scott, 2000).

However, looking more broadly, most students begin doctoral programs fully intending on persisting, or continuing to choose, to complete the doctoral degree (Tinto, 2012). Yet, almost half of students who begin a program do not complete their degree, equaling a loss of approximately 40,000 doctoral students annually across all disciplines (Ali & Kohun, 2006; Gardner, 2009b; Girves & Wemmerus, 1998). Attrition, or a decline in the number of students enrolled from the start to the end of a doctoral program, occurs at a variety of times throughout the degree process (Tinto, 2012). Students may leave in the first year of their program, realizing that either graduate school in general or the specific school is not the right choice. They may leave after completing coursework, before comprehensive exams, or at the aptly-named ABD (All But Dissertation) stage. Students leave doctoral programs for a variety of reasons – some positive and some negative. Indeed, some attrition in doctoral programs can be healthy. Students may depart for career goal changes (Holmes, Robinson & Seay, 2010), or life goal changes

(e.g. raising children, marriage, relocating for a partner/spouse) (Gardner, 2009b). Students may also depart for potentially negative reasons, such as academic dismissal (Tinto, 2012), or bad program "fit" (Golde & Dore, 2001). Another negative is that the doctoral process may present difficulties with mental health. For example, 47% of doctoral students at the University of California, Berkeley indicated some level of depression (Panger, Tryon, & Smith, 2014). Another recent study indicated half of Ph.D. students experience some sort of psychological distress, with one-third at risk of psychiatric disorders (Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017). It is no wonder people leave their doctoral programs without the degree. Unfortunately, attrition is often not discussed. People who leave programs have been called dropouts, which puts the responsibility solely on the student, and often conjures thoughts of failure (Cassuto, 2013).

The Challenge of Researching Doctoral Students

Investigating doctoral students provides myriad challenges for the researcher. Unclear definitions, unclear data with limited access, and varying program structures all muddy the waters of researching an important topic. Doctoral attrition is a tough aspect to research as it requires the researcher to consider what is defined as attrition, and how to access students who have left their doctoral programs. Past research often has focused on the overall graduate student population without disaggregating into degree type (e.g., master's, doctoral, professional) or discipline and field (Austin, 2002; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Strayhorn, 2010; Walpole, 2007). Due to significant differences between disciplines, graduate education is decentralized and managed by individual departments even though there may be a coordinating graduate school to oversee policies and general

admissions. The lack of differentiation in many studies on graduate students coupled with the decentralized nature of graduate study is challenging for researchers looking to broadly understand phenomena related to doctoral education. Additionally, there is even less on the newer, comparatively speaking, interdisciplinary field of higher education and student affairs.

Further, many studies do not disaggregate master's students from doctoral students, complicating determination of populations. If a researcher is seeking to learn more about doctoral attrition, data on "graduate students" that have left the program is less helpful. If a study does separate the populations, the nature of graduate study may still muddle the research findings. For example, a student may have entered a program intending to earn a doctoral degree and leave the program earning "only" a master's degree. In other words, it is often impossible to determine from data sets if a student entered the program as a doctoral seeking student and then transitioned to earning a master's degree, rather than the terminal degree. It is also difficult to ascertain why a student earned the master's degree rather than the doctoral degree. It could be a consolation prize of sorts, in which a student is not able to successfully complete doctoral requirements, or a student could determine a master's degree better meets their needs at that point in time, or a student decides to pursue a different field for their doctoral work.

Efforts to collect data on the attrition of doctoral students are often arduous. Only in the past 15 years has quantitative data about doctoral student attrition become available, thus providing limited research on the history of attrition throughout the existence of doctoral programs (Bair, 1999). Nationwide databases, such as the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED), have a significant body of data on students who complete

the degree, but very little comprehensive data exists on doctoral attrition (Brill, Balcanoff, Land, Gogarty, & Turner, 2014). The SED collects data annually from those who complete a research doctorate from an accredited U.S. institution. Information ranges from educational history and demographics to plans after graduation, and is intended to assess characteristics of doctoral students and trends in doctoral education (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2015). Limited data focused on attrition combined with data on students who do complete the degree does allow researchers and policy makers to make some inferences; however, true consideration of doctoral attrition is a relatively recent consideration for higher education research.

At the institutional level, significant challenges exist in finding data on doctoral candidates who do not complete the degree, since many institutions are reticent to publish this information (Monsour & Corman, 1991). If the data is available, it is often released to those associated with the programs, such as faculty or administrative assistants, and not in any broad fashion. Complications can also arise due to federal privacy requirements (Lee and Cayer, 1987; Middleton, Mason, Stilwell, & Parker, 1988), causing trouble in finding doctoral students who have left their programs. The field of study plays a critical role in the experiences of individual students at the doctoral level and may present challenges when reviewing attrition literature as experiences for students in science fields are very different from those of students in humanities fields and as such those in HESA, a smaller discipline typically in colleges or schools of education, will differ. While studies may group disciplines together, the norms and socialization of a discipline have a strong impact on the day-to-day lives of the students in that field,

including what their faculty find important. For example, in HESA programs, the field's interest in lifelong learning, focus on application, and consideration of inclusiveness and diversity (Barr, Desler, & Associates, 2000) certainly shape the experiences of students in our discipline.

Another challenge in tracking completion and attrition in doctoral programs relates to the different program structures, or when a student is truly considered a "doctoral student." Many programs use an "MA first" model, where students must complete a master's degree prior to being admitted to doctoral study. In the German model, students are considered graduate students until they have completed all other requirements beside the dissertation. At that point, they enter candidacy and are only then considered doctoral students. Finally, the U.S. model considers all students to be doctoral students as soon as they have been admitted to the program, regardless of their master's status. Because of this, many programs may not consider early stage attrition as doctoral attrition, if in fact they are not considered doctoral students at that point (Lovitts, 2001). This causes challenges in reviewing attrition research, as it is often unclear which model a program is using. However, most higher education and student affairs doctoral programs do tend toward the MA first model (Levine, 2005), since these programs are almost exclusively, up until recently, only found in the U.S. (Rumbley et al., 2014) and therefore should all use the same definition of doctoral student, which was a strength for this study.

Additionally, many doctoral programs do not have a cohesive cohort model, where students go through all of their courses together; rather, they may be co-enrolled in one to two courses (Lovitts, 2001). If a program uses a cohort model, faculty may not see

the entire cohort in one class; thus, it is less obvious if someone is missing (Lovitts, 2001). In education fields, students frequently attend part-time, are not funded by the department and often are working full-time elsewhere, and spend a significant amount of time in coursework. This is followed by independent work on dissertations that may be more connected to their full-time roles (Gardner, 2009a). This is different than much of the previous research on attrition. In higher education and student affairs, many doctoral programs are not cohort-based. Only eight programs in Rumbley et al. (2014) self-identified as programs with designed student cohorts.

Time to degree is another confusing issue in reviewing doctoral attrition and persistence research. Some studies show students in the physical sciences typically finish their degrees quickly, averaging about 7.6 years, while doctoral students in education take an average of 20 years from awarding of the baccalaureate to complete their degrees (Hawley, 2003; White & Grinnell, 2011). However, another source (Nettles & Millett, 2006) stated the mean time to degree in education as 6.28 years, quite different from the 20-year average. Problematically, researchers have measured time to degree in different ways. These have included undergraduate completion date to doctoral completion date, first enrollment in graduate school to graduation, and only considering the registered time in graduate school (Ferrer de Valero, 2001; White & Grinnell, 2011). Some studies are clearer about each category, referring to total time to doctorate – from baccalaureate to completion of doctoral degree, registered time to doctorate – time enrolled in a doctoral program, and post-baccalaureate time to doctorate – time from first enrollment in graduate programs to completion of the degree (White & Grinnell, 2011). This makes it

difficult to ascertain the meaning of "time to degree" in the literature and further complicates the determination of attrition.

Another limitation with existing research is that there seems to be an assumption among many stakeholders that graduate students are completely self-aware and fully developed – *"almost as if the development of the student ceases upon graduation from an undergraduate institution"* (Gardner, 2009a, p. 4, emphasis in original). In student development literature, the focus is on undergraduate students and neglects discussion of graduate student development in many contexts. Though there is some discussion of adult student learning, it is typically in the context of non-traditional undergraduate students. The lack of consideration for graduate student development can also be observed with the lack of support services and programming at the graduate level (Billups & Kite, 2009). Faculty tend to perceive doctoral students as colleagues or professional equals, with disregard to their additional roles as growing and developing students. Further diminishing the visibility of their student role, doctoral students may serve in quasi-professional roles, such as teaching assistants, research assistants, or graduate program assistants, or completely professional roles by working full-time in higher education while completing their degree. If the doctoral student is considered a professional equal in many capacities, it can be challenging for faculty and student alike to remember to incorporate the student identity into consideration. Finally, doctoral students are a very diverse group, ranging in age, experience, parent or dependent status, full-/part-time attendance, and many other aspects (Gardner, 2009a).

Also, there are significant differences within the group related to how they enter a program and what their backgrounds may be. Students may immediately enter a doctoral

program after completing their undergraduate degree, which is uncommon for HESA students, or they may return to doctoral study in the middle of their career (Gardner, 2009a), which might be more common to HESA. In fact, HESA students often do return in the middle of their career to complete the terminal degree, after some time working in the field of higher education (Levine, 2005). It is common for doctoral programs in HESA to require a certain number of years in the field practicing as part of the admissions requirement, which is different from the master's level requirements.

Too Many Doctors…or Not Enough Jobs?

Shortly after World War II, colleges and universities in the United States saw a 500 percent increase in enrollment, significantly affecting the amount of degrees being conferred (Cohen, 1998). Many saw the staggering rising numbers and realized the need for more people with doctoral degrees to teach (Cohen, 1998). Others were concerned colleges and universities were increasingly requiring a terminal degree of their faculty (Nettles & Millett, 2006), which then led to concern that institutions were graduating more doctoral students than needed. This pervasive concern still exists today, with many questioning the value of doctoral education, and its necessity in American higher education (Cohen, 1998; Cyranoski, Gilbert, Ledford, Nayar, & Yahia, 2011). Many researchers discuss a dilemma in higher education today: are there too many Ph.D. graduates (Hartle & Galloway, 1996; Larson, Ghaffarzadegan, & Xue, 2014) or are there too few jobs? Are these the same problem, or different, yet related issues?

In addition, faculty often view a graduate as a "success" when that student gets a tenure-track position at a large research university (Asher, 2010). Kendall (2002) argued doctoral education is in crisis, producing students for a world that no longer exists. This

crisis is not always evident, as the vast majority of doctoral graduates are employed (over 98 percent), though likely not in higher education (LaPidus, 1995). Programs have become so specific, researchers and students are unable to translate their experiences into environments beyond academia (Asher, 2010). Less than forty percent of doctoral graduates will become employed as full-time faculty members (Jenkins, 2015), yet much of the training and socialization of doctoral students focuses on faculty careers. Realistically, many graduates will go on to non-academia jobs – which often pay much better (Asher, 2010). In HESA, it is definitely more likely that graduates will go on to administrative positions over faculty since there are limited HESA programs unlike English literature or chemistry. With 74 doctoral programs listed in NASPA's Graduate Program Directory (NASPA, 2016), there simply is not an abundance of faculty positions available.

Varying perspectives exist regarding whether US institutions simply have graduated too many doctoral students, or whether the doctoral degree has developed into a credential of sorts (Jenkins, 2015). For example, Jenkins (2015) suggested departments may perceive they need doctoral students so that faculty can teach small doctoral seminars, while those students teach mind-numbing introductory level courses. In 2013, Benjamin Ginsberg controversially argued institutions of higher education are ruled by "deanlets" and other administrative staff rather than by faculty, to the detriment of students. Though it could certainly be argued whether students benefit or are harmed by the rise of administration and the "fall of the faculty," it is clear administrative positions at universities have grown exponentially (Ginsberg, 2013). HESA programs almost certainly contribute to this growth, and simultaneously perpetuate the growth.

If the Ph.D. is meant to train students to become academics and researchers, should admissions be reduced in the wake of the lack of tenure-track academic positions? Certainly, contingent faculty (such as adjunct or non-tenure track) positions are increasing across the United States (American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 2016). Over 50 percent of faculty appointments are part-time, and non-tenure track positions are increasing (AAUP, 2016), which means there are opportunities for graduates; however, the ethics of contingent faculty appointments are far beyond the scope of this dissertation. In addition, much of the growth in the field of higher education has been in developing nations, yet most of the current research focuses on industrialized nations, so there is much opportunity in these areas (Rambley, 2014). Within higher education, there are also trends toward scholar-practitioners; those who have significant preparation and graduate education toward research and the implementation of the findings (Streitwieser & Ogden, 2016). However, students are not often well-informed of these alternative academic careers.

In addition, simply limiting admissions would likely impact the recruitment and retention of underrepresented populations in doctoral education. Rothman (2014) brought up an important point – to reduce admissions would likely mean reducing accessibility for a number of underrepresented populations. Stacy (as cited in Golde, Walker, & Associates, 2006) noted programs in chemistry often discouraged women, underrepresented populations, and older students from pursuing the doctoral degree, because faculty expected students to get their undergraduate degree and immediately continue to doctoral study. Is it time to see significant change in doctoral education? Perhaps. It may be a benefit to see a significant amount of attrition from doctoral

programs, especially if doctoral programs are not producing graduates who are ready to work outside of academia.

Unfortunately, I was unable to find research exploring whether the doctorate is overpopulated in the field of higher education and student affairs. Anecdotally, faculty with whom I have worked have mentioned people are often overqualified for jobs in HESA fields once they earn the terminal degree. Possibly related to this pattern, the field of higher education certainly values lifelong learning and advancing knowledge, as well as developing administrative and management skills (American College Personnel Association (ACPA), 2013). Even if the doctoral degree is overpopulated – or people are over-degreed - in HESA fields, the impacts of attrition still significantly affect doctoral students, families, and society through negative repercussions, lack of advancement opportunities, and missed effects of advanced education, such as more access to health care.

Purpose of the Study

Though a certain amount of attrition can be healthy, there are a variety of reasons it can be problematic for students, faculty, departments, institutions, and myriad others. The departing student is certainly impacted. For example, leaving the program may cause psychological harm, including significant depression or even thoughts of suicide (Lovitts, 2001). Students may also find difficulty maintaining relationships with family and friends after they have left (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, & Abel, 2006). Faculty usually spend a significant amount of time and energy working with their students, and may have significant financial costs (whether those are borne by the individual faculty member, the department, university, or grant funding) but definitely emotional and

mental time loss. In fact, the former Associate Dean of the Graduate School at Notre Dame, Peter Diffley, stated that the University of Notre Dame could save over a million dollars by reducing doctoral attrition by 10 percent (Diffley, as cited in Smallwood, 2004). Lost costs may also include teaching or research assistant salary or revenue from courses a student would take (Diffley, as cited in Smallwood, 2004).

The purpose of this interpretivist study was to understand to what voluntary departers from doctoral higher education programs attributed their departure. The study aimed to add to the current research by focusing specifically on the field of higher education and student affairs, as it is fundamentally different from many other fields of doctoral education.

Research Question

The primary research question was "To what do people who voluntarily depart from doctoral programs in higher education attribute their departure?" The study explored the reasons for departure of fifteen people who have departed from doctoral study in higher education and student affairs without completing the degree. Further, the theoretical framework was attribution theory, which considered how people used information to understand why things have happened (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). For individuals, understanding why something might happen helps the person to control the outcome, predict when it might occur, or rationalize its occurrence (Fisk & Taylor, 1991).

Importance of Study

Specifically, higher education and student affairs administration programs are unique; previous research on doctoral attrition does not consider three key aspects that make HESA programs merit additional consideration. First, higher education and student

affairs administration is commonly considered an interdisciplinary field, drawing on theories from many social sciences, such as sociology, education, history, and law to answer critical questions (Aboelela et al., 2007; Kehm, 2015). Graduate students are not only socialized to graduate study, they are also socialized to an academic field. For an interdisciplinary field, socialization may differ based on the fields to which each program finds itself closer. In other words, a HESA program that tends to align with a focus on legal and policy issues in higher education would certainly socialize students to different values, attitudes, and norms than a program that aligns with a sociological view or within a counseling program. Previous doctoral attrition studies have considered the impact of socialization to a specific discipline (Berelson, 1960; Golde, 2000; Lovitts 2001). However, the interdisciplinary nature of higher education and of its socialization is not something that has been previously considered in the context of doctoral attrition.

Second, graduates from higher education and student affairs administration programs often intend to pursue careers in administration, rather than faculty positions. In marketing materials, programs cite a variety of possible careers for doctoral graduates, including, but not limited to, institutional research, development, academic program administration, teaching and learning programs, academic technology, student affairs, senior level administrators, policy analysts, career services, academic advising, academic libraries, marketing, community outreach, and graduate student affairs (Birnbaum, 2015; Stanford University, 2015). While a doctorate is not required for everyone who works in student affairs and higher education, there is certainly an expectation that those who intend to advance in the field would pursue such a degree (Komives & Taub, 2000) and increasingly it is a preferred qualification for positions at and above the director level.

Third, women and students of color make up a majority of the students in many doctoral programs within education (Bell, 2011; Gardner, 2009a, National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2015). Current trends show women and underrepresented populations are more likely to leave their doctoral programs than men and specifically white men (Smallwood, 2004). This is problematic because these populations are also significantly underrepresented in administration, though increasing faculty and staff diversity has long been an important initiative for many institutions of higher education (Rendón, 2003; Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004). As the demographics of the U.S. continue to change, K-12 classrooms are now seeing a majority of students who identify as minoritized (Maxwell, 2014). Many of these students will continue on to college, and will shape many aspects of higher education. It is important that this diversity of race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc., is reflected in faculty and administrators on college campuses. While student diversity is important, it is transient; diverse administrators and faculty members are more able to shape campus culture in the long term (Lynch, 2013). Further, representation of diverse voices in administration show diverse students positions of power and influence that are available to them if they continue on their educational path (Rendón, 2003).

Many analogies referring to doctoral attrition and persistence reference separating the wheat from chaff, the cream rising to the top, or a sink-or-swim mentality, whereby good students complete the degree and those perceived to be less capable do not (Cox, Adams, & St. Omer, 2011). Lovitts' (2001) research actually showed little to no academic differences between those who complete and those who leave; students at

vastly lower levels of academic preparation in terms of undergraduate GPA and standardized test scores were as likely to complete as their peers with strong academic records and standardized test scores – and as likely to leave. Additionally, attrition rates can often be due to multiple factors within the environment, some of which disproportionately affect underrepresented populations (Adams, 1993; Sowell, Zhang, Bell & Redd, 2005). For example, these could include advisor/advisee relationship, norms of the academic field, current field demographics, and program socialization.

Many in higher education think the rates are not alarming compared to undergraduate attrition rates or drop-out rates of high school students. However, Berelson (1960) argued, "The matter is perhaps more serious for the graduate school because its selection is supposed to be better; its type of education is more expensive, and…its drop-outs stay around longer than the undergraduate drop-outs, half of whom leave in the first year" (p. 2).

Another consideration is related to education's place at the heart of our nation's future successes. Doctoral graduates help promote innovation and discovery, and assist in economic growth. Past recipients of doctoral degrees have traditionally held top positions in education, labs, research facilities, business, and industry (Gardner, 2009a).

Overview of the Study

This qualitative interpretivist study used attribution theory to consider the reasons people choose to leave a doctoral program in higher education and student affairs without completing the terminal degree. I began by considering the available literature on doctoral education, persistence, and attrition, and recognizing the current gaps in knowledge. By focusing in on higher education and student affairs programs, this

dissertation adds to the literature through confirmation of previous findings on doctoral attrition as well as new nuances for those affiliated with HESA programs to consider. This dissertation aims to share the stories of doctoral departers and provides information to doctoral programs and graduate schools about points of concern for those who chose not to complete the degree. As the researcher, I also share implications for practice as well as future directions for research on this important topic.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of Doctoral Education

The history of doctoral education extends back to the twelfth century (Cox, Adams & St. Omer, 2011; Kurtz-Costes, Andrews Helmke, & Ülkü-Steiner, 2006). The first doctoral degrees were granted in Paris in the twelfth century, in theology (Th.D.), law (J.D.), and medicine (M.D.), while the first doctorate of philosophy was granted in the early nineteenth century at Berlin University (Cox, Adams & St. Omer, 2011; Kurtz-Costes, Andrews Helmke, & Ülkü-Steiner, 2006). The first doctoral degrees awarded in the United States came from Yale University in 1861, shortly followed by the establishment of Johns Hopkins University in 1876, a university solely dedicated to graduate education (Gardner, 2009b; Golde, Walker, & Associates, 2006; Nettles & Millett, 2006). The degrees were created to provide an opportunity for students to become experts in their fields; a way for them to become leaders in specific fields of study (Golde, Walker, & Associates, 2006). The Ph.D. degree allowed students to learn how to conduct research in their discipline, typically culminating in a dissertation.

Since the first doctoral degrees awarded in the United States, the number of universities granting doctorates has risen significantly. By 2000, over 500 universities awarded doctoral degrees (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Many institutions only granted a few

doctoral degrees, but approximately 130 institutions granted almost 80 percent of the doctorates in 2000 (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Additionally, by the early twentieth century, a doctoral degree was required for most faculty appointments at major universities (Toma, 2002).

Eighteen types of research doctorates were designated in the 2012 Survey of Earned Doctorates (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2015). The research doctorate, which includes the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), is earned by demonstrating the production of original knowledge through academic research, typically through a thesis or dissertation (Gardner, 2009b). Research doctorates include the Ph.D., as well as a variety of other doctorates, such as the Doctor of Arts (D.A.), Doctor of Fine Arts (D.F.A.), and the Doctor of Theology (Th.D.) (USNEI, 2007). The other type of doctorate is the professional doctorate. The professional doctorate is awarded in professional fields such as medicine, veterinary medicine, pharmacology, dentistry, psychology, optometry, and law (Gardner, 2009b). Additionally, the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.), often granted by HESA programs, and executive doctorates were recently reclassified as professional doctorates (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2015). These degrees, in theory, typically do not require a formal thesis or dissertation and instead focus on significant hands-on training and internships (Gardner, 2009b; NASPA, 2016).

The structure of graduate education varies widely between departments and academic fields. The U.S. Department of Education stated the research doctorate is not awarded for coursework toward the degree, but for the independent research presented in

the dissertation (USNEI, 2007). Many degrees consist of approximately three years of coursework, followed by some type of qualifying comprehensive exam (USNEI, 2007). Near the end of coursework, a student selects a doctoral committee, including an advisor, other senior faculty, and usually at least one faculty from an outside department (USNEI, 2007). The committee's role is to provide feedback as a student embarks on the independent research process, and to ultimately determine whether a student has successfully displayed expertise in the designated area of study (USNEI, 2007). After a student has successfully completed coursework and qualifying exams, the student prepares a research proposal. The research proposal requires a student to determine a problem to be addressed, conduct a literature review, and determine how to conduct a study that fills in where the current literature has gaps. The student's committee then decides if s/he is ready to conduct the research in question. When their proposals are approved, students then spend time researching their topic, analyzing the data, and completing a final dissertation document. Dissertations include the research proposal, delineating the need for further study, and then require the students to embark on studying the research question at hand, followed by analysis and developing findings/conclusions (Gardner, 2009b; Golde, Walker, & Associates, 2006). Students may also need to meet other milestones, such as entrance exams, residency requirements, time limits, progress reports and creating a degree plan (Lovitts, 2001; Malmberg, 2000). Disciplines vary greatly in the time to complete each component (Lovitts, 2001). Students in the arts and sciences may spend one to three years in coursework, a year taking examinations, and the remainder of the time working on their dissertations (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007).

History of Doctoral Degrees in Education

Since 1999, over 40,000 doctoral degrees have been awarded each year. Approximately 60 percent of these degrees have been issued in science and engineering fields. However, if the data is disaggregated into individual disciplines, the most commonly awarded doctorate is in education – around 16 percent of the total doctorates granted each year (White & Grinnell, 2011). About 200 programs confer more than 7,000 doctorates in education each year (White & Grinnell, 2011). This growth in education related doctorates can be partially attributed to legislative endeavors such as No Child Left Behind that aim to ensure children have highly skilled teachers, as well as pay structures that benefit those with terminal degrees (White & Grinnell, 2011).

Within education, two terminal degrees exist – the Ph.D. and the Ed.D. (Levine, 2005). The first Ph.D. in education was granted at Teacher's College, Columbia University, in 1893, while the first Ed.D. was awarded by Harvard University in 1920 (Shulman, Golde, Conklin Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006). Over 250 universities offer one or both education doctorates, though it is likely Ph.D.s now outnumber Ed.D.s (Levine 2005). Both the Ed.D. and the Ph.D. are used to train scholars as well as high-ranked practitioners such as superintendents and directors of university offices. This is different than many other fields, where one degree prepares scholars and a separate degree prepares practitioners – for example, a M.D. prepares one to practice medicine while a Ph.D. prepares one to perform research (McClintock, 2005).

In theory, the Ph.D. is intended to prepare students for faculty positions and research while the Ed.D. is designed to prepare students for professional practice (Toma, 2002). The Ed.D. is supposed to be more focused on skill acquisition. Students in Ph.D.

programs complete dissertation research, work significantly with faculty, and spend significant time in coursework (Toma, 2002). In reality, there are numerous similarities between the Ph.D. and the Ed.D. Where institutions offer both degrees, students in the Ph.D. and Ed.D. are often co-enrolled in the same classes, including research methods courses – and many institutions require a dissertation of their Ed.D. students as well (Osguthorpe & Wong, 1993; Toma, 2002). Many institutions choose to offer one degree, with many favoring the Ph.D. (Toma, 2002). This is largely attributed to the assumed prestige of the Ph.D. (Toma, 2002). In many cases, institutions have offered the Ed.D. because they were unable to get state approval to grant the Ph.D. (Osguthorpe & Wong, 1993). Interestingly, though the Ed.D. and Ph.D. are incredibly similar in a number of ways, many studies using the Survey of Earned Doctorates as a data source only consider the Ph.D. in education, since Ed.D. graduates do not submit data (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2015).

G. Stanley Hall, past president of Clark University, is commonly referred to as the father of higher education studies (Dressel & Mayhew, 1974). He developed courses in higher education at Clark University, and was later involved in developing a higher education specialization within an education degree (Barnett, 2007). The first known doctoral (Ph.D.) and master's degree in higher education were granted from Clark University in 1900 (doctoral) and 1906 (master's). This led to development of other higher education graduate preparation programs at institutions such as The Ohio State University, Columbia University's Teachers College, and the University of Michigan (Wright, 2007). In fact, the Higher Education and Student Affairs Leadership program

at the University of Northern Colorado (the author's doctoral program) celebrated fifty years of providing graduate education in 2015 (Birnbaum, 2015).

Specifically, doctoral degrees in higher education are intended to develop experts in higher education and student affairs administration. Career paths for graduates are widely varied, depending on the specialization a student chooses (Freeman Jr., Hagedorn, Goodchild & Wright, 2014). They enhance scholarly work in higher education and encourage research (Komives & Taub, 2000). Many graduates become directors in a specific functional area of higher education (residence life, student activities, career development, etc.), faculty members in higher education, researchers, consultants, or academic administrators (deans or vice presidents) (Komives & Taub, 2000). According to a recent NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) survey, 60% of Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAOs) hold a terminal doctoral degree. Seventy-five percent of doctoral graduates in CSAO positions earned their doctoral degree in higher education or education (Sponsler & Wesaw, 2014).

While not a comprehensive list (programs submit information to be included), NASPA's Graduate Program Directory lists 74 doctoral programs in higher education and related fields throughout the United States. 28 programs are Doctorates of Education, and the remaining 46 programs are Doctorates of Philosophy. Eight institutions offer both the Ed.D. and Ph.D., and the remaining 66 offer one or the other. Common titles of programs include: Educational Leadership and Management, Higher Education Administration, Educational Leadership, Higher Education, Higher Education Administration, Student Affairs in Higher Education, and Education Administration and Policy Studies (NASPA, 2016). Program focuses vary widely from policy and advocacy

to student development theory to administration to higher education research (NASPA, 2016).

Recently, additional higher education and student affairs programs have been developed to meet the needs of potential students. Some programs focus on serving diverse students, particularly at Minority Serving Institutions (e.g. Jackson State University) or Hispanic Serving Institutions (e.g. master's program at Adams State University) (Freeman Jr., 2012). Other programs focus specifically on preparing students for advanced academic administration, with a particular focus on known leaders in higher education who wish to earn a terminal degree without leaving their current jobs (Freeman Jr., 2012). Community college leadership is another area of expertise for some doctoral programs (e.g. Texas Tech University) (Freeman Jr., 2012). These programs provide yet another interesting twist to consider when researching higher education and student affairs programs.

Most higher education doctoral programs require similar material for admission – letters of recommendation, successful completion of a master's degree, a satisfactory Graduate Record Exam (GRE) score, and a minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) for undergraduate and master's work. Specific programs may also ask for a statement of purpose, writing sample, or professional experience (Komives & Taub, 2000).

Education doctoral students often spend most of their time in coursework, and minimal time in research (Gardner, 2009b). Ph.D. dissertation research is focused, with significant individualized work with faculty. Ed.D. programs often are fairly similar to Ph.D. programs, with fewer requirements and less emphasis on full-time coursework and residency (Shulman et al., 2006).

Doctoral education is experienced differently within and among disciplines, as each discipline has its own culture, qualities and values to consider (Gardner, 2009a). It is important to consider the context of higher education and student affairs as well. Professionals in higher education often work with a number of student affairs divisions. Traditionally, student affairs divisions include admissions, orientation, residence education, student activities, student conduct, academic advising, and many other offices. The student affairs field arose from a desire to better manage control of students in early universities. Early professionals were faculty asked to take on additional responsibilities related to student needs (Dungy & Gordon, 2010). As the undergraduate population has grown, student affairs has become more specialized, with graduate programs focused on the theory and practice of student affairs, further developing into doctoral programs focused on student affairs educators (Kuk & Hughes, 2003).

Doctoral Education Demographics

With over 684,000 students applying to doctoral programs, 150,000 offers of admission, and about 468,000 students currently enrolled in programs, it is important to consider the characteristics of the students who make up doctoral education (Allum & Okahana, 2015). For example, women are less likely to pursue the most advanced levels of education, and are more likely to leave a program before completing the degree (Gardner, 2009a). Women students often have a challenging time finding women to mentor them, since fewer women are in higher-ranking positions (Kurtz-Costes, Andrews Helmke, & Ülkü-Steiner, 2006). Men often complete their degrees more quickly, though this may be particularly tied to specific disciplines, as male-dominated fields (e.g. science and engineering) tend to have quicker times to degree completion (Abedi & Benkin,

1987; Berg & Ferber, 1983; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Researchers have not been able to clearly determine if time to degree completion is connected to gender itself or to differences in other factors based on gender. For example, past research has shown disparity between gender in doctoral funding (Seagram, Gould, & Pyke, 1998). Additionally, African American students of any gender are almost universally less likely to persist than whites.

Within doctoral education, women and students of color from the United States are less likely than men and white students to complete the doctorate (Posselt, 2016). Additionally, African American and Latino students earn degrees at rates less than expected, given their representation in the general population (Posselt, 2016). Both women and people of color have historically been severely underrepresented in the doctoral and professional ranks. This is either by choice, or as a result of social climate within a discipline (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001).

Demographers anticipate the United States will become a majority-minority nation by 2044 in which white people are no longer the racial majority (Colby & Ortman, 2015). At current rates, around one-third of the millennial generation (born 1980-2000) identifies as underrepresented minorities (Colby & Ortman, 2015). However, underrepresented populations earn graduate degrees at less than half the rate of white students (Sowell, Zhang, Bell, Redd, & King, 2008). These demographics are important to consider when looking at doctoral attrition in higher education programs, because they impact who is in the door in the first place.

In 2009-2010, 13.3 percent of the doctoral degrees awarded were in the overall field of education (Bell, 2011). Approximately 41 percent of students who applied to

doctoral programs in education were admitted in 2009, the highest among all fields (Bell, 2011). Women comprised 69 percent of doctoral students in education in 2009 and earned almost 67.6 percent of the doctorates awarded in education in 2010 (Bell, 2011). Students of color are also a significant population of doctoral students in education (Gardner, 2009a). African Americans are the largest U.S. minority earning degrees in education (National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2015). In fact, 40 percent of the doctorates earned by African American students since the late 1930s (when data on this population was first maintained), were awarded in education (Gardner, 2009a). A far smaller population of graduate students in education, just over 12 percent, identified as Asian (Bell, 2011). There are also more changes in enrollment patterns. Education students were most likely to be enrolled part-time, with only 24.1 percent of students attending full-time, while 53.8 percent of students in other fields were attending full-time (Gardner, 2009a; White & Grinnell, 2011). Most students do not hold graduate assistantships and may work full-time elsewhere (Toma, 2002). Education is the only broad field where more students were attending part-time than full-time in 2010 (Bell, 2011). Additionally, education students tend to be older. The median age for an education doctoral graduate was 43.1 years of age in 2004, while STEM was 31.7 years, and the median age of all granted doctorates was 33.3 years (Gardner, 2009a). "Unlike the typical youthful high school graduate who goes to college *instead of doing something else*, the typical adult student goes to college *in addition to doing other things*" (Tinto, 2012, p. 76, emphasis in original). In fact, in a study by Nettles and Millett (2006), only 25 percent of students in education doctoral programs had decided to pursue a doctoral degree either before or during their

undergraduate education. Education students were more likely to decide to pursue the terminal degree after completing the master's degree, while working full-time in the field (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

Undergraduate Persistence and Retention

While research and theories that explain undergraduate persistence and retention cannot necessarily be applied directly to doctoral education, a brief exploration of the topics may help explain some of the trends in doctoral education. Vincent Tinto (2012), one of the most well-known researchers in the area of student attrition and persistence, stated institutions have a responsibility to the students they admit; they must do what they can to help the student complete the degree, creating environments that support students (Tinto, 2012). Further, Tinto (2012, p. 10) said, "student retention and graduation is shaped by the availability of clear and consistent expectations about what is required to be successful in college." In other words, retention can be directly molded by providing clarity to success – in the classroom, in a major, and on campus (Tinto, 2012).

In undergraduate education, over half the people who start at an institution of higher education will leave that institution, and over 1 million of those students leave higher education altogether without completing a degree (Tinto, 2012). Attrition in undergraduate programs has significant impact, as earning a college degree provides many benefits to graduates, such as higher average earnings, and a greater selection of job opportunities (Tinto, 2012). Students in undergraduate programs are more likely to leave during or immediately following the first year (Tinto, 2012). Some of these students will transfer to another institution and earn a degree there while others will leave higher education altogether (Tinto, 2012).

Early research on undergraduate student departure focused on psychological models of educational persistence, which believed student ability and personality had the strongest impact on a student's decision to leave (Astin, 1964; Suczek & Alfert, 1966; Trent & Ruyle, 1965). Previous research considered intention to complete a degree and commitment to completing a degree as two critical factors in retention and attrition (Tinto, 2012). If a student has high aspirations for educational or career goals, it is more likely that student will complete the undergraduate degree (Tinto, 2012). Similarly, if a student is committed to complete the work required to earn the degree, the student is more likely to actually do so (Tinto, 2012).

Interactions with others may also impact attrition. These factors may be related to adjustment, difficulties, incongruence, and isolation (Tinto, 2012). Students coming to college must adjust to new social and intellectual ways of doing things. For some, they are quickly able to adjust to this new way of life, while others struggle and quit. Students may also face difficulties with their coursework, making friends, or in being away from the family and friends they grew up with (Tinto, 2012). Many student affairs practitioners cite the first six to eight weeks as being the most formidable in determining whether a student will graduate, and in fact, many students do depart during this initial adjustment period (Blanc, DeBuhr, & Martin, 1983; Tinto, 2012). Students may also find their needs, interests, and desires are not compatible with the institutions they have chosen – or had chosen for them (Tinto, 2012). This could be as simple as not realizing an institution did not have the major a student wanted to more complicated issues like choosing a religious school that does not align with the student's faith tradition. Students may also leave because they find the coursework too easy – they're bored (Tinto, 2012)!

Finally, extensive research has been conducted on the importance of connection for students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). One student development theory focuses specifically on the consideration of marginality and mattering. Schlossberg's theory suggests students need to feel like they matter to someone, that someone notices they are there, someone cares about them, someone will be proud of or sympathize with them, that someone needs them, and that someone appreciates them (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

Obligations and finances are two external factors important to consider as well (Tinto, 2012). Students who leave undergraduate programs may find their external obligations are too much for them to be in college (Tinto, 2012). Two significant examples of external obligations are family and employment. Financially, students may find themselves unable to afford college, or affect the type of institution they are able to attend. Students may also need to work while completing an undergraduate degree, which takes time away from studying and engaging in the life of the institution (Tinto, 2012). Students may also find they are able to make more money by leaving school (Tinto, 2012). Though certainly not a common example, consider a highly skilled football player who has the opportunity to leave school to join the National Football League.

Understanding why students leave at the undergraduate level could provide a wealth of information on what can be done to encourage students to persist or understand what structural barriers exist for students who would otherwise proceed. It also helps to understand the positive reasons students may leave an institution and how those are valued within society. The body of literature on undergraduate persistence, retention, and

attrition will continue to inform doctoral education going forward. There are certainly some factors that may be similarly applicable in doctoral education, such as the impact of connecting with one another, personality, and finances. However, graduate students interact in smaller communities, typically within their own fields of study (Gardner, 2009a). Undergraduate persistence and retention research should be used to inform research on graduate and doctoral students moving forward, while simultaneously developing better methods and models for understanding doctoral persistence and retention.

It is interesting to note undergraduate attrition researchers meet some of the same challenges as doctoral attrition researchers. Challenges arise in determining whether students have enrolled at other institutions, whether they earn a degree, and whether there are other impacts to their attrition behavior, such as a decision to pursue a career path where a college degree is unnecessary. Additionally, research regarding why a student departs an institution cannot simply be applied to all departure, as students who depart higher education altogether may have different considerations than those who choose to transfer to another institution. The research may be applicable, but should not be applied carte blanche.

While differences between the undergraduate and graduate student populations do make it challenging to generalize this research to doctoral students (Cooke, Sims, & Peyrefitte, 1995), Tinto (2012) does begin to consider a theory of doctoral persistence. His theory proposed three stages toward doctoral degree completion. The transitional phase incorporated a transition to doctoral student culture in the early years. Second, students were leading to candidacy, collecting knowledge and skills in order to conduct

research. This stage culminated with the comprehensive exam. Finally, the dissertation stage, where students were exclusively working on their dissertations. However, Tinto (1993) noted challenges in developing a model to incorporate all aspects of persistence at the doctoral level.

Master's Degree Attrition

Minimal research has been conducted specifically on master's degree retention and attrition. Much of this research has combined all graduate students, or focused solely on doctoral students, leaving the middle degree in limbo. Luan and Fenske (1996) considered the impact of financial aid on persistence and degree completion in master's degree programs, and found student financial aid positively associated with degree completion. Considering master's degree programs is often challenging, as undergraduate and doctoral programs typically have a clearer idea of what they are trying to accomplish, and how they will do so, while masters programs often vary significantly in their scope and aim (Woolcock, 2002).

The Council of Graduate Schools has delved into research on attrition and completion rates for students in the master's degree with the Master's Completion Project (Allum, 2016). Within this pilot study, five institutions were considered. Most students chose to enroll in master's programs to attain professional goals, or to increase opportunities for promotion, pay, or advancement within their field (Allum, 2016). Students in Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs were least likely to leave, with a completion rate of 86 percent. Almost 70 percent of students in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs surveyed completed their

degrees (Allum, 2016). For students who did leave, they were generally satisfied with their programs, but often ran into interference from their employment (Allum, 2016).

Additionally, the completion of a master's degree may not been seen as a success. Certainly, in some fields, a master's degree is desirable; for example, the Master of Business Administration is considered a terminal business degree. However, if a student's educational goal was a doctoral degree, earning the master's degree may not be seen as success (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988).

Anecdotally, some student affairs practitioners joke about "staying in college forever." This may mean some students who choose to pursue the master's degree in higher education and student affairs may not realize the importance of the academic component, of the research underlying the work student affairs practitioners perform. A future area of study might look deeper into attrition within higher education master's programs to determine underlying causes.

Admission of New Doctoral Students

Understanding how students get into doctoral programs is a step in exploring attrition. Historically, the requirements for admission to a doctoral program were the same across all doctoral programs at an institution (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Students in all programs were expected to meet the same standards, such as proficiency in a foreign language, minimum grade point average, and minimum test scores. As programs developed, departments determined specific criteria for admission that differed from university requirements, though most universities still maintain basic criteria for admission (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). For example, students at the University of Northern Colorado must meet minimum requirements set by the Graduate School in order

to be admitted to any degree program. Each department may request additional materials or maintain additional criteria to determine admission (Burchett, 2014). In most cases, the department makes its own decisions, and this decision is sometimes further decentralized to individual faculty. A recent article commented that admissions decisions were like a black box, where the only thing public was the result (Cassuto, 2016). Some departments publicize all criteria, including decision-making rubrics; others do not. Some have recruitment weekends to bring students to campus to meet faculty and possible colleagues; others see ascertaining "fit," or connections between peers, faculty, the program, and the community as a student's responsibility. Programs may also find themselves making admissions decisions to meet faculty needs (Posselt, 2016). Faculty also have based admissions decisions on subjective criteria, such as the denomination of a religiously affiliated school a prospective student attended (Posselt, 2016).

Interestingly, scores on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and attendance at a highly selective university are two key predictors of admission to graduate programs (Posselt, 2016). Both of these criteria skew in favor of well-represented populations in higher education, and do not advance diversity. Additionally, for programs concerned about rankings in the *U.S. News and World Report*, the rankings are determined by expert opinions and perceptions (Morse, 2016) – while statistical indicators are also used, these are clearly subjective measures of excellence. Faculty also felt a responsibility to the institution to admit students who were likely to succeed, which can significantly impact the diversity of a pool, given that men and white students tend to score better on the GRE and attend selective undergraduate institutions (Posselt, 2016).

Almost 90 percent of education doctoral students were attending their first choice institution (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Nettles and Millett (2006) attributed this to the age of education doctoral students, as well as their tendency to already be in full-time employment – making geographic limitation necessary. Education doctoral students typically did not study education as undergraduate students (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Since education is considered an interdisciplinary field, often students come from a variety of undergraduate backgrounds (Nettles & Millett, 2006). This is especially true in the field of HESA, as there are very few undergraduate degrees in student affairs. Additionally, the very foundation of HESA as a discipline is interdisciplinary, pulling knowledge from a variety of fields, such as sociology, psychology, and history. The vast majority, almost 80 percent, of doctoral students in education had completed a master's degree prior to being admitted to their doctoral program (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Additionally, many students had taken over a decade away from school after completing their bachelor's degree prior to pursuing their doctoral degree (Nettles & Millett, 2006). This can be attributed to the importance of real-world experience in the field of education (Nettles & Millett, 2006).

Graduate faculty often believe they have developed strong selection processes to admit the best students. Therefore, they may believe attrition within their programs is minimal, and only due to a student's choice to leave (Lovitts, 2001). Interestingly faculty believe if they had more information to make admissions decisions, it would lower the rate of attrition, though the type of information faculty think would help is unclear (Lovitts, 2001). Graduate programs may feel there is no need to focus on students who leave, as there are consistently high numbers of students seeking admission into doctoral

programs (Lovitts, 2001). They may also feel there is nothing they can do once a person decides to depart (Lovitts, 2001). Some institutional factors may also be out of the realm of what the department can control, such as graduate school policies, including time allowed to complete the degree, coursework requirements, etc. (Gardner, 2009a). Furthermore, the department typically cannot control any personal factors that may lead to a student's departure.

Socialization of Graduate Students

Another important consideration in doctoral attrition is the socialization doctoral students receive in their academic departments. Students are influenced by and act as influencers in their educational communities (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). As part of a department, graduate students are socialized both to an academic discipline and to their departments (Gardner & Mendoza, 2010). They are prepared for roles their faculty believe are important for their discipline and the focus of the department, including teaching and research assistants (Gardner & Mendoza, 2010). In HESA programs, faculty prepare students for a variety of roles in higher education and student affairs leadership – research and teaching assistants are far less common. Students may be employed in graduate assistantships in student affairs offices, but they are also just as likely to be employed full-time in higher education. Other students also show new students how the culture works in their department, either perpetuating past culture or attempting to make change (Gardner & Mendoza, 2010).

When a student begins doctoral study, each department displays (intentionally or unintentionally) a culture and identity to students (Lovitts, 2001). This might include how students interact with faculty, how students interact with one another, what the

program finds important. For example, a program might host weekly trivia nights with faculty and students at a local bar, possibly showing the importance of collaboration, camaraderie, and informal connections between students and faculty. Another program may choose to share well done presentations by a select few students, perhaps showing an importance of competition among students to be considered elite. Some students successfully acclimate to the new culture, while others choose to leave their programs (Lovitts, 2001). Both academic and social integration into these systems are important, and can either lead to or prevent student departure. Academic socialization is one of the primary purposes of doctoral education (Lovitts, 2001). Students who do not socialize to the academic atmosphere may be more likely to leave, as they may find incongruence with their initial reasons for seeking a graduate degree. Students are simultaneously socializing to their roles as graduate students, and to their future roles as leaders in the profession. Students must interact with their peers, faculty, and professionals in order to develop their own professional identity (Weidman et al., 2001).

Indeed, socialization begins before a student steps foot on campus. Throughout the application process, students take part in anticipatory socialization where they begin to ascertain "fit" among different degree programs, and determine whether they intend on pursuing a graduate education (Lovitts, 2001). Once students choose a doctoral program, they may or may not receive additional information about the department, degree requirements, or campus. Some programs provide an orientation, though this may or may not be focused on the student's identity as a graduate student. Instead it may focus on their identity as teaching or research assistants (Lovitts, 2001). Students may or may not receive any sort of guidance on course selection and sequencing (Lovitts, 2001).

Students may also have access to graduate student handbooks, which outline departmental policies and degree requirements, and they may also have an academic advisor through their program.

The role of an advisor is a critical part of the socialization process, and advising happens in a variety of ways among departments (Lovitts, 2001). Some students are assigned an advisor at the beginning of their program. These assignments tend to be based on how the student's described intellectual interests align with the faculty member (Lovitts, 2001), or assignments may be done randomly. These advisors serve an important role in helping students understand the academic field they are entering, as well as the graduate student status they now hold (Mendoza, 2007). This includes how tasks are performed in the field, publishing requirements, professional interaction, and can even connect to social and political status within the field – if your advisor is well-known in your field, this can help you network (Mendoza, 2007). Further, advisors help shape performance in the degree as well as how to interact with faculty (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Mendoza, 2007). Within HESA programs, faculty may play a slightly different role, especially as many students come to their doctoral programs with significant professional experience. The role may shift more to helping students navigate what it means to become a scholar in higher education, rather than what it means to be a professional in higher education. This scholar identity may be as a faculty member, or may be as a scholar-practitioner.

Another important component of the socialization process is related to career services for graduate students, an area often neglected by graduate programs (Lehker & Furlong, 2006). Institutions assume students are choosing to enter a specific area of

study and they already know what they plan to do upon obtaining the terminal degree (Luzzo, 2000). There is often an assumption that students who pursue the doctorate intend to become faculty (Golde & Dore, 2001), though this assumption may happen less frequently in HESA programs. Within HESA programs, many students intend to continue in their roles as student affairs practitioners once they complete the degree, in positions such as a Dean of Students or Director. Because of these assumptions, students may choose to leave doctoral programs because they are no longer interested in a faculty position, or perhaps because they are no longer interested in working in HESA administration (Lovitts, 2001). However, many students are not provided information regarding other employment opportunities for doctoral graduates in education, such as researchers for national organizations such as the National Science Foundation, or in industries serving educators, such as College Board.

Students are often not well prepared to become faculty members either (Austin, 2002). Often graduate students serve as teaching or research assistants in positions better suited to serve faculty and institutional needs rather than the needs of the individual doctoral student (Austin, 2002). A graduate teaching assistant may teach the same course repeatedly rather than having a new experience teaching another course because the department needs instructors due to demand for a particular course (Austin, 2002). Students who have taught the same course repeatedly do not have experience in course development or course structure. They may also lack research experience if their primary role has been as an instructor. If a HESA student is interested in becoming graduate faculty upon completion of the degree, they may try to take advantage of teaching opportunities as they arise. For these students, they may struggle to find teaching

opportunities since programs rarely include undergraduate courses, and many institutions will not allow a student pursuing a graduate degree to teach graduate courses. Graduate students may be able to work cooperatively with a faculty member but typically cannot be the sole instructor. Students may be able to teach undergraduate support courses, such as a first year experience course, but students in these courses are often very different from those in graduate programs.

Doctoral Persistence

In order to make sense of students leaving doctoral programs, an understanding of why doctoral students persist to graduation is helpful. Tinto (1993) discussed persistence as a reflection of students' individual experiences and how they integrate those experiences into their frame of reference. Academic integration plays a strong role in graduate study and in doctoral student persistence. Students who persisted with the doctoral degrees also mentioned significant sacrifices, such as missing time with family or financial loss (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Many faced personal sacrifice, intervening life experiences, and dissertation challenges. They persisted despite personal and institutional factors (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). Many factors could be considered from the perspective of the institution as well as the perspective of the student.

Personal Factors

A key component to doctoral persistence is the relationship between doctoral student and advisor (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 2000). The importance of the faculty advisor-student relationship is paramount, though students may turn to peers to learn who to reach out to for help or how to appear confident (Golde,

2000). "Simply put, where positive relationships between students and their advisors or other faculty members were present, students were significantly more likely to complete their doctoral degrees" (Bair & Haworth, 2004, p. 15). In all studies reviewed, the relationship between student and advisor was critical to the success of a student (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Mah, 1986; Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 2000). Characteristics of a good advisor can include personality match with the student, supportiveness, frequent interaction, ease of accessibility, helping the student to progress in a timely manner, and treating the student as a new professional in the field (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007). Students also place importance on idea sharing, interest in similar topics, and a sense that the advisor truly cared about them as people, as well as their progress in the doctoral program (Golde, 2000). Students who develop strong, meaningful relationships with their advisors where they can discuss expectations and receive adequate guidance regularly are more likely to graduate (Bair & Haworth, 2004). The importance of the advisor-advisee relationship has been documented in studies regarding doctoral persistence among students in higher education and student affairs programs as well (Barnes & Austin, 2012; Holley & Caldwell, 2012; Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008).

In Stallone's (2003) study of factors associated with attrition in an educational leadership doctoral program, she found human factors such as cohort support and student relationships were significant in helping students persist toward graduation. Students felt the relationships among their cohort significantly helped motivate them toward completing the degree (Stallone, 2003). Cohort size was another impactful factor. Students in education doctoral programs with smaller entering cohorts were more likely to complete their degrees – and take less time doing so (Bair, 1999). The author's

doctoral cohort began with 12 students, and to the best of her knowledge, four students have completed the doctorate at this time, four students defended their dissertations in the same semester as the author, one is actively moving toward completion, and two students seem to have left the doctoral program, with no progress toward the degree.

Motivation is another factor correlated with persistence to degree (Bair, 1999). If students are personally motivated to complete the degree, they are consistently more likely to do so (Bair, 1999). These students may also be the type of people who believe that leaving the doctoral program is a sign of failure, and thus, something they are unwilling to even consider (Bair, 1999). Having clear goals, expectations and objectives related to the doctoral degree is another impactful factor on persistence for those in education doctoral programs. Students who have a clear focus in why they are in the doctoral program, what the doctoral process would be like, and what they would do following completion were more likely to complete (Bair, 1999).

Within education doctorates, Gardner, Hayes, and Neider (2006) found three characteristics of successful doctoral students. Students who completed the degree were curious and inquisitive, independent and humble. Those who were able to direct and motivate themselves were more likely to be successful in their pursuit (Gardner, Hayes, & Neider, 2006). Generally, education doctoral students do rate their interactions with faculty as beneficial in their quest for the degree (Nettles & Millett, 2006). However, these characteristics are not easy to determine during an application process.

Institutional Factors

Financial support was another key indicator for those who persisted (Bair & Haworth, 2004). Students who receive a fellowship, teaching assistantship, or research

assistantship upon admission to the doctoral program are far more likely to graduate (Nettles & Millett, 2006). These students tend to have stronger connections with faculty, less concerns about finances, and a clear commitment to the degree (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Ducette, 1990). Strayhorn's (2010) study of financial factors related to graduate student persistence found self-financing (received no financial aid) doctoral students were less likely to complete the degree. These students may have been unable to access financial aid due to poor credit history, loans in default, or worries about how they would repay the loans upon completion (Strayhorn, 2010). Additionally, students with a low or zero Estimated Family Contribution (EFC) – or low income families - were less likely to complete the degree, while those with EFCs above $10,000 – high income families - were more likely to complete the degree (Strayhorn, 2010). Furthermore, students of color were more likely to take out loans (Strayhorn, 2010). These factors are important to consider in HESA given the diversity of backgrounds prevalent in education graduate programs.

Additionally, though literature does not address this, many HESA professionals who work on a college campus receive some form of tuition remission. The impact of tuition remission on persistence and attrition has not been considered. One study regarding undergraduate persistence and unmet financial need simply eliminated consideration of tuition remission, tuition waivers, and veteran's benefits in their consideration of met and unmet aid (Bresciani & Carson, 2002). This may mean finances have less of an impact for HESA students. It may also promote students beginning a degree simply to take advantage of a human resources benefit without having the motivation to complete the degree.

In Ferrer de Valero's (2001) study regarding time to degree and completion rates of doctoral students, many students felt guidance regarding general examinations such as comprehensive examinations was inadequate; some felt they were over-prepared and wasted valuable time, while others felt underprepared and not set up for success (Ferrer de Valero, 2001). Students then progress to the dissertation with varying levels of readiness (Holsinger Jr., 2008). Students often do not understand the research stage of the degree, though no one truly does until they actually complete a study. They have a vague concept of what a dissertation is, but do not realize the magnitude of the document (Lovitts, 2001). Often students do not feel prepared to tackle this hurdle and complete this type of research (Gardner, 2009a). The advising style of many faculty was to allow the student to determine their own pace, without setting up a timetable or schedule, which was problematic for some students (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). In early stages, the advisor/mentor may need to provide more direction, while the dissertation portion of the degree should be directed by the student (Holsinger Jr., 2008). Ferrer de Valero's (2001) study did not include students in educational doctoral programs, which is a significant limitation in the scope of this study. While the challenges those students faced and overcame to earn the doctoral degree are important, it is unclear how those same factors would appear in a HESA doctoral program. Given the population of students typically in education (often full-time professionals, older, with other family and life commitments, attending school part-time), it seems students in HESA programs might benefit from a flexible, yet structured approach from their advisors that understands the nuances of their individual situation and goals, and fits with the university restrictions and timelines.

Additionally, students in education doctoral programs likely do not have the same funding resources, and may have different financial needs that impact attrition.

All But Dissertation

Colloquially, students who complete the majority of requirements for their degree, including qualifying or comprehensive exams and dissertation proposal, are referred to as "ABD: All But Dissertation." Students in this stage often feel isolated, insecure, and uncertain of their abilities. They may also feel frustration, embarrassment, guilt, and confusion at how to navigate the final stage of the degree (Ramos Jr., 1995).

Students who are ABD may or may not be actively moving toward completion. They are in an awkward mental place where they are simultaneously persisting and leaving the program. Challenges include a variety of factors, such as poor working relationships with advisors and committees, issues with research and choice of topic, finances, family, peers, employment elsewhere, and a loss of interest and motivation for doctoral study. Students also find perceived challenges in bureaucracy, such as residency requirements, or barriers set by the graduate school, such as time limits or publishing requirements (Malmberg, 2000). These factors sometimes lead to a student's ultimate decision to leave the doctoral program; the student may also overcome the challenges and persist to completion. In the past, approximately 80 percent of students who reached the ABD stage completed their degree programs (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992).

For students in HESA programs, the individualized nature of the dissertation can be a struggle, especially when coupled with a full-time job and personal responsibilities, such as creating a family or assisting aging parents. Though this may initially seem to be a benefit, many students find their professional roles in conflict with the amount of time

and focus necessary to complete independent research (Gardner, 2009a). Students also find the coursework they have completed fulfills their needs, and they do not ultimately find the dissertation a beneficial exercise. Additionally, some students come to the realization that their initial interests in pursuing the doctorate have changed, and a doctorate is no longer necessary for their goals.

Doctoral Attrition

The causes of doctoral attrition can be deeply embedded in the academic programs, or may be factors outside of the program. Students leave for any number of reasons, including procrastination (Green, 1997; Kluever, 1997), low researcher self-efficacy (Faghihi, Rakow, & Ethington, 1999), finances (Abedi & Benkin, 1987; Bair & Haworth, 2004; Girves & Wemmerus, 1988), poor advisor relationship (Ferrer De Valero, 2001), low integration level with faculty (Golde, 2000; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lovitts, 2001), low integration level with peers (Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lovitts, 2001), and incongruence between student goals and program focus (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Golde, 1998; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). Many of these factors can be attributed to the individual student, the program, and the institution simultaneously and separately (Bair & Haworth, 2004).

More often than not, students leave due to multiple causes, including academic, personal, and financial (Lovitts, 2001). Around 70 percent of students leave for personal reasons rather than for academic or financial reasons (Lovitts, 2001). Personal reasons may include family interests, burnout, relationship difficulties, or job opportunities. Academic reasons can include a lack of satisfaction with the program of study, faculty, advisor, a loss or lack of interest in the discipline, unsatisfactory academic performance,

or losing an advisor (the advisor is no longer able to serve as advisor) (Lovitts, 2001). Faculty most often cited loss of interest in the discipline as a key factor in student departure; however, Lovitts (2001) found the most important reason cited by students is a lack of satisfaction with some facet of the program. Finally, financial factors could include the immediate –students were unable to meet expenses, lost financial assistance, or they (or their spouse/partner) received a good job offer or lost a job. Students may also have felt employment prospects or future earnings for their field of study were dim, and therefore, the doctorate was not worth continuing (Lovitts, 2001).

Individual

Students certainly leave for personal reasons. These include family interests, needs or pressures (desire to start a family, illness, and health problems), mental or physical health problems, lack of motivation, burnout, or a desire to go in a different direction (Lovitts, 2001). Some students find it challenging to begin or maintain relationships with significant others during doctoral study, take care of family responsibilities, or care for others (Smith, Maroney, Nelson, Abel, & Abel, 2006). Students and programs may see these reasons as positive or negative – and the view may change in time. For example, a student who left the program because of mental health issues may see this departure as negative at the time of departure, but a few years later, may see the positive impact of removing a significantly stressful experience.

Students are also more likely to leave if they feel socially isolated (Lovitts, 2001). Doctoral programs are known to have characteristics leading to social isolation. In education programs, students are often isolated from their colleagues, working solely with their doctoral advisors (Gardner, 2009a; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Toma, 2002).

Many doctoral students in education are also on campus only for their classes, as they rarely have assistantships (Gardner, 2009a). Additionally, in HESA programs, students may be on campus, but in very different roles as full-time professionals. The program is often new and different from other experiences the student has had previously, and doctoral programs are typically long and stressful. Students who did not persist were less likely to have shared an office – more than half of those who left did not share an office, adding to their feelings of social isolation (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Students who do not acclimate to the social aspects of graduate study may still find importance in their initial reasons for beginning doctoral study, but they may not be satisfied with the community they have become part of and still choose to move on (Lovitts, 2001).

Impostor phenomenon, or feelings of intellectual inadequacy, have been found to impact the experiences of doctoral students (Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb & Zeeh, 2011), and may be another cause for departure. Students may feel anxious or feel as though they have failed as they work through the degree (Bernard, Dollinger, & Ramaniah, 2002; Langford & Clance, 1993; Leary, Patton, Orlando, & Funk, 2000). In Craddock et al. (2011), researchers found doctoral students did not feel they were balancing all of the commitments the way they felt they should. Additionally, the students felt as though their previous coursework had not prepared them as well as they perceived others had been prepared (Craddock et al., 2011). This feeling of inadequacy was heightened in the first semester for many.

Other individual factors related to doctoral education that have been researched include the relationship between marriage/partnership and success in doctoral programs, productivity, social interactions, and degree progress (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Price

(2005) examined the impact of marital status and gender on graduate students and found male students who are married when they begin the doctoral program are more likely to graduate and complete their degree quicker than single male students. Married women are not any more likely to graduate, but do finish the degree slightly quicker than their single counterparts (Price, 2005). Sixty-two percent of the doctoral students in education in Nettles & Millett's 2006 study were married (given their age, this is not surprising). Among all fields of doctoral study, women were more likely to have a spouse with a terminal degree (compared to a spouse with a bachelor's, master's, or less education) (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Again, the research in these areas often focuses on those who have completed the degree.

Program

The relationship between student and advisor is paramount. Many students left due to inadequate or inaccurate advising, a feeling their advisor was not interested, attentive, or available to the student, or due to a negative relationship or conflict between the student and advisor (Gardner, 2009a). Students who left their programs were likely to attribute their departure, at least in part, to the quality of advising they received (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 2000). Quality, in this context, referred to positive relationships, ability to discuss problems, developing a personal relationship with the advisor, student satisfaction, frequent and easy interaction, and a sense of trust in their advisor (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 2000). Students are often unaware changing advisors may be an option (Lovitts, 2001). One study found students who did not complete the degree had quantitatively fewer interactions with their doctoral advisors than those who did complete the degree (Smith, et al., 2006). It is not clear,

however, if students who had fewer interactions did so because they chose not to meet with their faculty advisor more frequently, or because their advisor was unable or unwilling to meet. Interestingly, many faculty see themselves as playing a key role in student success when students are achieving, but as a passive onlooker when a student departs (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). In a study from McAlpine and Norton (2006), deans typically thought students were solely responsible for their departure from the program, meaning there is nothing the institution could or should do for departers.

Doctoral students also find the learning experience is not what they had hoped (Lovitts, 2001). Students who did not complete the degree were more likely to be dissatisfied with their intellectual development, regardless of GPA (Lovitts, 2001). Some students realized their department intended to thin out the program, having a sort of "only the strong survive" mentality. These students often felt their programs were not supportive of their intellectual growth (Lovitts, 2001). They felt learning was no longer something to be enjoyed, but rather something to be endured (Lovitts, 2001). Additionally, a student's previous coursework may not have prepared the student to complete the introductory coursework, and comprehensive/qualifying exams, let alone a dissertation. Some faculty did not see this preparation as their professional responsibility (Cao, 2001). Doctoral students often cited confusion about program requirements as a problem contributing to their desire to leave (Ali & Kohun, 2006). There are often differences between published and provided materials, and the path to graduation is not always clear (Ali & Kohun, 2006). Other students run into significant and possibly insurmountable problems with their research. This is especially prevalent in colleges of education, as graduates did not feel as positive about their experiences with dissertations

as did those from other fields, citing poor preparation for research, and lack of assistance throughout the dissertation process (Myers, 1999).

Institutional

Once a student leaves a doctoral program, there is often little to no follow-up from the institution (Lovitts, 2001). Students who have significant experience in doctoral study – whether or not they complete the degree - should be in positions that are professional, technical, managerial, and administrative, given their advanced study (Lovitts, 2001). These types of positions allow more autonomy, career mobility, and typically have higher salaries. However, many students struggle to find positions that value their additional academic work when they have not completed the degree (Lovitts, 2001).

The institution may also have policies and procedures that can make pursuing a doctoral degree more difficult. Gardner's (2010) research cited ambiguity of graduate school requirements. One student expressed her confusion on which paperwork needed to go where, and who needed to sign that paperwork, joking "You should get a Ph.D. in graduate school paperwork" (Gardner, 2010, p. 72). As a professional working in graduate education previously, staff members in the Graduate School would echo this same sentiment to me, sympathizing with students who were confused regarding the sheer amount of paperwork that needed to be completed.

Impact on Others

Doctoral attrition may have far reaching impacts. As Madsen (1992, p. 8) remarked,

> *"…the university; and society as a whole – have a vital interest in the successful outcome of every thesis or dissertation project. Every time a graduate student's dissertation sheds some light on a dark corner of human understanding and banishes some segment, however small, of the world's mystery, society reaps incalculable benefits."*

The impact of leaving a doctoral program affects not only the student, but also the faculty in the graduate programs, administrators, and, quite realistically, the future of education. Departing students may have been able to make significant contributions and have strong impacts if they had completed their degrees (Lovitts, 2001). This is not to say those without a doctorate cannot make meaningful contributions; however, those with a doctorate may have access to positions that may allow their contributions to be taken more seriously. (Whether this should be the case or not is far beyond the scope of this research.) A number of stakeholders are certainly interested in doctoral attrition in education – or should be. This includes the students who leave the program, those who stay, prospective students, the families of the students who leave, higher education, society, and members of underrepresented populations at all levels of education.

Doctoral students. Doctoral students invest a significant amount of time and money into their degrees, and are one of the primary populations that should be considered. All doctoral students are affected by doctoral attrition, whether they are the students who leave or the students who persist to graduation. Additionally, prospective students are impacted by program attrition. This impact may be borne out in a number of ways. For instance, there is no foolproof method to determine which prospective students will complete the degree, so there are inevitably students who are not admitted

to doctoral programs that could have completed the degree, while other students are admitted that ultimately leave their doctoral programs. Additionally, if there are significant institutional or programmatic factors that are not being revealed, these could impact which students are chosen for the program, or how a student might be treated once admitted. For example, a program may hesitate to accommodate a clearly pregnant woman with young children, because they may have had multiple female students leave because of family obligations. Certainly, to deny a student needed accommodations based solely on pregnancy would violate Title IX, as it discriminates on the basis of sex (National Women's Law Center, 2012). Regardless of legality, students are certainly concerned about how their programs – or prospective programs – may consider their pregnancy (Dell'Antonia, 2013; Kendzior, 2014).

Students who leave doctoral programs before completing the degree may take significant amounts of debt with them. While the Survey of Earned Doctorates includes data on the amount of debt graduates have at the completion of their programs, similar data for students who depart does not exist (Lovitts, 2001). Students who leave their doctoral programs without doctoral degrees do not typically have the same earning potential as those who have completed the degree (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). However, this is a bit challenging to consider in HESA programs, as many students attend part-time, and may have graduate assistantships or full-time employment that provides tuition remission. Even if HESA doctoral students are not taking out loans, they may have loans from their undergraduate or master's degrees that will have be paid off if and when they leave graduate school. Because HESA doctoral graduates are a unique sub-set of graduates, it is not known if they leave with significant amounts of debt, or

what the impact of debt is given the connection to tuition remission. Again, this is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but certainly an area of consideration.

Doctoral students who leave may face significant emotional impacts when they depart a doctoral program. In a case study of 68 former doctoral students, Golde (2000) found some students avoided telling anyone they were leaving the program and why they were doing so. Many said they simply provided answers the department was looking for (Golde, 2000). Others said they felt like no one really cared about their departure (Golde, 2000). If doctoral programs are conducting their own assessment on why students leave, it seems they might receive similar responses – of students telling the departments what they want to hear, rather than revealing issues that may have significantly altered their course of doctoral study. However, departure interviews for graduate students do not seem to be common practice in higher education. Often programs pay no attention to students who depart, as many do so quietly. In fact, programs may not even know a student has departed until the student is gone and no longer enrolled. Extremely, others commit suicide or murder in an attempt to draw attention to problems (Golde, 2000). In 1996, Frederick Davidson, a master's student at San Diego State University, killed three professors during his thesis defense, which he expected to fail though faculty say he was not in danger of being dismissed from the program (Perry, 1997). In 1998, chemistry student Jason Altom committed suicide with potassium cyanide, blaming abusive supervisors and pressures of doctoral study (Hall, 1998). Former students have experienced severe depression, acted out violently, or attempted suicide or bodily harm (Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000; Lovitts, 2001). They also experienced shame, embarrassment, anger, irritation, regret, the feeling of loose ends, disappointment, and

frustration (Willis & Carmichael, 2011). Factors that may cause some to leave their program may inflict damage on the students who remain to complete their degrees or the faculty in the program.

Students in the doctoral programs where other students do not complete the degree are also affected. The department may have used financial support to fund students who do not complete the degree, removing that money from the pool of resources available for other students (Pauley, Cunningham & Toth, 2000). Others may have benefitted from a student's knowledge in coursework, comprehensive exam preparation, or the dissertation process. They may also have had less time with faculty advisors, less access to graduate assistantships, or not able to take a particular course.

Students in a cohort model may also lose a peer. Cohorts were created to help provide structure, a supportive group of peers, and a way for instructors to maximize contact with students (Donaldson & Peterson, 2007). That person could have played a supportive role to others in the cohort, or may cause other members of the cohort to begin to consider whether leaving the program is the right decision for them as well. Additionally, if a student's departure is due to institutional or departmental issues that are unresolved when the student leaves, other students may face significant impact. For example, if a student leaves because of an unsupportive advisor, that advisor most likely works with other students that may also struggle to complete the degree.

Families of doctoral students. Doctoral students often bring a number of other significant relationships into the graduate education process. These significant others may include a partner(s), children, parents, friends, and many others (Gardner, 2009a). The significant relationships in the doctoral student's life may experience emotions

connected to their doctoral student. This could include anger or frustration toward a system that held someone back, or a feeling of being left behind, for example (Gardner, 2009a). Significant others may also experience positive emotions related to a student's departure from a doctoral program. Spouses may feel left behind when their partner pursues the degree, and children may actually be excited if a parent leaves a doctoral program, as they may feel neglected when the parent has to focus on schoolwork (Hawley, 2003). If a student left for a reason like marriage or beginning a family, it is certainly understandable a significant other may have mixed emotions regarding the student's departure. In fact, it is possible the partner may have driven the decision. Unfortunately not a shock to me, I have found such articles as "Real Talk: Your Ph.D. Won't Stop You from Getting Your M.R.S. (Lucas, 2012)," "Does Higher Education Dim Marriage Prospects for Women? (Daily Circuit, 2012)," and "Earning My Ph.D. Dealt My Marriage A Final Blow (HuffPost Live, 2014)," dealing with such issues as "marrying down," choosing a partner with similar educational credentials, and choosing not to pursue an advanced degree so as to not put off men from pursuing. Additionally, I have personal experience with this, as a friend of mine is recently went through a divorce, in part because of her desire to pursue a master's degree (her ex-husband has a high school diploma).

Research has shown the impact of a parent's undergraduate and graduate degree attainment on their children's education (Choy, 2001; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Kniffin, 2007; Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003). Generally, families of doctoral graduates benefit when the students complete their degrees. The graduate generally earns a higher wage upon completion of the degree (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Children of graduates

are better prepared for school and tend to spend more time in educational activities than children whose parents did not graduate (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). One study found children with at least one parent with a graduate degree scored significantly higher on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) than those whose parents did not finish high school (*The Economist*, 2014). Children of college graduates are more likely to attend college, be more prepared to do so, and are more likely to persist to graduation (Choy, 2001; Gardner & Holley, 2001). This can be further extrapolated when one realizes educational attainment leads to a higher median salary. A higher median family salary also leads to a higher likelihood of attending a selective college. Students who attend selective colleges are more likely to graduate on time, and to pursue graduate study (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Within humanities fields, almost 35 percent of doctoral students had at least one parent with either a Ph.D. or first professional degree (J.D., M.D.) (Nettles & Millett, 2006). In education, the number was much lower, with 16 percent of students with a parent with a Ph.D. or first professional degree, though the authors do not address why this might be (Nettles & Millett, 2006). While similar data does not exist on children of doctoral departers, inferences could be made. For example, a parent who has completed the doctoral degree seems more likely to value education and support a child's pursuit of higher education.

Institutions of higher education. In times of economic instability doctoral departments have been eliminated, faced enrollment caps, or limits on state funding (Lovitts, 2001). Additionally, doctoral work involves a lot more one on one interaction between faculty and student (Gardner, 2009b). When a student leaves, the time and money invested are simply gone. Graduate faculty have placed greater emphasis on

selection processes in an attempt to select students who will complete the degree, but attrition rates still remain the same (Stallone, 2003). Graduate faculty should also be concerned about doctoral attrition as it impacts others within the department. A teaching assistant who leaves the graduate program may have affected undergraduate students positively and negatively. A graduate assistant in a student affairs office may have similarly affected undergraduate students. Departing students may leave due to systemic problems in the academe that remain unaddressed, thereby continuing to cause problems that could have been addressed.

Additionally, understanding why students leave doctoral programs can help program administrators consider doctoral attrition within their department, university, or discipline contexts. An individual has not necessarily failed if he/she does not complete the degree, but the graduate institution may have failed in producing the next generation of leaders (Mah, 1986). Further, the loss of potential doctoral graduates may also impact others who may have chosen to pursue the terminal degree had that graduate completed the degree (Mah, 1986). In other words, a graduate's trajectory may ultimately lead him/her to a role that then inspires another to pursue the terminal degree.

Broader higher education also sees impact related to doctoral education and attrition. Many doctoral students are primarily interested in working in a faculty career, but there are fewer tenure track openings available (Gardner, 2009a). Within HESA, a fair number of students are interested in a faculty career, and another significant portion are interested in practitioner roles in administration. Students who are interested in working in faculty careers due to their love of teaching, research, and service, are often not aware of the conditions of faculty work. Students may not have a clear understanding

of the tenure process, workload expectations, research funding, and low salaries (Golde & Dore, 2001). Those aiming for administrative positions may have similar concerns, though this has not been well explored in current research. However, many of the doctorates have become so specialized in research training that they do not have the skills to perform other necessary parts of faculty and administrative roles, especially teaching (Golde & Dore, 2001). Additionally, business, industry, government, and non-profit organizations need intelligent and skilled employees, but doctoral graduates often struggle to transition out of higher education into the workforce (Golde & Dore, 2001).

Society. Students who graduate reap social and financial rewards that ultimately extend beyond the individual (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Doctoral degree production enables the country to remain globally competitive in a knowledge economy (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Doctoral degrees garner prestige for the granting institution. Graduate schools and research facilities in the United States consistently rank among the best in the world (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010).

Future generations are also highly impacted. The doctorate is often seen as preparing the faculty and educators of the future. We must consider whether we are losing potentially great faculty members or student affairs professionals because they left their doctoral programs. Losing students from underrepresented populations also has a significant domino effect. Undergraduates often find it helpful and supportive to see faculty that mirror some of their characteristics, whether that be race, ethnicity, ability status, etc. (Cushman, 2007). Such connections are helpful to a sense of belonging, a crucial part of undergraduate retention (Tinto, 2012). The depth of research on underrepresented populations in undergraduate education is massive, and far beyond the

scope of this research, but suffice it to say significant populations are underrepresented in higher education, or in specific career fields (i.e. women are underrepresented in STEM fields), and doctoral attrition could affect these populations immensely (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013).

An educated populace also benefits the community in a number of ways (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Those who complete the doctoral degree have higher median earnings and pay more in taxes to local, state, and federal governments (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). People with higher levels of education are less likely to rely on social support programs, less likely to be imprisoned, and more likely to have health insurance (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). Increased education levels lead to a populace more likely to save the government money rather than cost a significant amount (Baum, Kurose, & Ma, 2013). They are also more likely to engage in healthy behaviors, such as not smoking, exercising, and eating well (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). They are also more likely to vote, volunteer, and be knowledgeable about local issues (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013).

Underrepresented populations. Women are less likely than men to want to be faculty (60.1 percent vs. 67.35 percent), and students of color less likely than their white counterparts (58.4 percent vs. 64.2 percent) (Golde & Dore, 2001). White men are most likely to aspire to faculty roles, followed by men of color, white women, and women of color. Additionally, women are more likely to be interested in faculty positions in community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and comprehensive institutions rather than research institutions (Golde & Dore, 2001). Trends also show women, underrepresented populations, students from the United States (as opposed to international students), and

those in humanities/social science degrees are most likely to leave their doctoral programs (Smallwood, 2004). This could lead to perpetuating a cycle where white men and international students continue to attain the terminal degree and the ensuing benefits, and underrepresented students continue to be underrepresented in education and in fields requiring higher education. Indeed, Smallwood made the argument that decreasing attrition rates in doctoral programs may be one of the best ways to reverse the "shrinking domestic talent pool" of American and underrepresented populations. However, much of this data is from general doctoral student studies, and does not focus on the reality of HESA programs. Especially given the percentages of underrepresented populations in education doctoral programs, considering future destinations is important.

The fact that there are populations that are not well represented on our campuses should be another cause for concern. In 1999, less than three percent of faculty and three percent of administrators in higher education identified as Latino (Rendón, 2003). Increasing faculty and staff diversity has long been a diversity initiative for many institutions of higher education, though a somewhat unsuccessful one (Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004). One significant cause for this underrepresentation is related to doctoral education; if those from underrepresented populations are not earning doctoral degrees, they are not eligible for positions that require the credential (Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004). Even in fields like education, where higher numbers of students come from underrepresented populations, most faculty are still from dominant populations (Trower & Chait, 2002).

Given that more women and students of color are at risk for leaving doctoral programs, administrators need to consider how their program environment may be

helping or hindering an underrepresented population. Numerous education stakeholders have acknowledged the absence of minority faculty within the academy, an observation that has, again, been attributed to the small number of doctoral degree recipients of color (Moody, 2004; Tierney & Sallee, 2008). It is critical to consider the impacts of doctoral attrition on underrepresented populations, as it clearly has an impact on every level of education. Education is one of the most demographically diverse fields of graduate study (Gardner, 2009a). With the most recent federal administration's focus on education, being aware of diversity and its impact on education becomes critically important (Obama, 2012). Multiple programs exist to focus on education of underrepresented minorities in all fields, including the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, as well as the Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate and the Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation (Alliance for Graduate Education and the Professoriate, 2015; Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation, 2015; TRIO, 2015). Educating a diverse population of students is imperative to the future of our country at every level.

Conclusion

Though research regarding attrition is growing, scholars must continue to pursue a variety of questions regarding attrition from doctoral programs. Current research does not do a good job of addressing a comparatively unique population of doctoral students in higher education and student affairs programs. These students often begin doctoral study for different reasons (tuition remission may be an example), are older, more likely to be working full-time, and face different challenges than can be addressed in general studies of doctoral attrition. These issues are important for many to consider, as many graduates

of HESA programs go on to become leaders in the field and guide the future of our discipline. As attrition rates still remain around 50 percent according to some estimates, there are many issues worth empirically investigating. Many stakeholders depend on researchers to continue this pursuit of knowledge.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Given the personal nature of the topic of doctoral attrition, a qualitative methodology was best suited to answer the research question (Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Those who align with qualitative research typically believe multiple realities exist for each situation, and these realities are constructed by social interaction and individual perspectives of the same phenomenon (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Researchers are interested in understanding interpretation of experience, world construction, and the meaning people attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research relies on relationships between the researcher and the participants, and often includes the participants in the research process to varying degrees (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). The researcher guides data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009), which allows the researcher to develop the research process throughout the study, providing flexibility in research design that is responsive to findings. Finally, qualitative research does not attempt to generalize to a broad audience; rather, it seeks to provide thick and rich description, asking the reader to assess its applicability in other situations (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). I identified with these researchers, and have found qualitative research the preferred method to answer the types of questions I sought to understand.

Through this qualitative research study, I attempted to understand the experience of doctoral attrition. Though I had a research question in mind when beginning the study, the question evolved throughout interactions with participants and data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003; Mertens, 2010). The primary research question was "To what do people who voluntarily depart from doctoral programs in higher education attribute their departure?" My interest in doctoral attrition, or "want-to-do-ability" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p.10) came partially from a desire to understand my own life experiences as someone who had considered departing but chose a different path. My experiences as a doctoral student helped form relationships between the doctoral student participants and myself, an important component of qualitative research (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

Positionality

Positionality, in research, is a way to clarify the relationship between researcher and participants, and researcher and topic (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). I share reflections on my experiences as a way for the reader to understand my lenses, interest in this study, and how I view data (Merriam, 2009). Because I believe my own values are not separate from how I conduct research, I repeatedly reflect on how my own experiences shaped how I already viewed doctoral attrition. As I ventured through the research process, I consistently debriefed with a number of people, including my dissertation advisor, and other doctoral students who are completing the dissertation process at the same time. This venture included journaling and conversations with my advisor about how I am analyzing data in light of my own beliefs. It was critical that I

reflect on my own relationship to the topic and to the participants with whom I worked (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006).

In qualitative research, the researcher is an active part of the discovery process, serving as the instrument for data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Due to my active participation, I disclose my own identity, assumptions, and beliefs so that readers may understand the framework that guided the inquiry (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). I also understand that my own experiences and identities may have an impact on the research (Merriam, 2009). I identified these so that I could monitor and understand how they shaped my collection and interpretation of the research (Merriam, 2009). I identify as a white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied woman. These identities differed from some of my participants. Participants had experiences similar to mine, but with different identities, and attributed those experiences differently than I would. I do not believe it is possible to separate my personal values and beliefs from my research, and gravitate toward methodologies that do not require me to do so. I have only experienced the world through my own lens, and my experiences impact how I may make meaning of experiences of those different from myself. I managed this by engaging in reflective behavior, including a researcher journal. I also worked with participants to ensure I did not misinterpret words or experiences through my own lenses or attribute meaning that did not exist.

Though I often desired to do so, I did not leave my doctoral program. In fact, I fought significantly to remain enrolled. It was possible I would perceive someone's choice to leave a program negatively if they dealt with similar situations as me, so it was important for me to reflect. I did this both internally through a researcher's journal and

externally through the use of peer review and member checks to ensure I was accurately representing the voices of my participants and not ascribing my meanings to their experiences without their input.

I thrive on knowledge. I am innately curious, and often consider how various factors impact each of us in our chosen endeavors. I believe each of us has our own stories and past experiences that come to shape how we experience everything going forward. I also believe a known world exists, and that we each experience the world with our own perspectives and experiences in mind. Coupled with my undergraduate experience in sociology, I have always been interested in using context to come to understanding. I see how our position in society affects each of us differently, which leads me to ask questions that do not typically have black and white answers. My interest in connecting with my participants certainly affects the type of research I want to do. I find myself trying to learn more at every opportunity about how someone sees their world, and how they gain perspective on their experiences. I find it fascinating to consider how experiences of similar phenomena differ. Finally, I believe our experiences strongly impact our meaning-making, and find the best way to learn about this is by collaborating with participants. These values have shaped how I view research and how I am choosing to approach my dissertation topic. They guide my beliefs about knowledge acquisition, reality, and ethics.

Epistemology, Ontology, and Axiology

Epistemology, or assumptions about how knowledge is acquired, is a critical building block of research (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). I used an interpretivist epistemology to understand and made the assumption people construct their own

understanding based on their interactions and experiences with one another. Interpretivism is often connected to Max Weber's concept of *Verstehen*, or understanding (Crotty, 1998). Social interaction is the basis for knowledge within an interpretivist paradigm, and knowledge is mutually negotiated between the researcher and participants specific to the context (O'Donaghue, 2007). Under the interpretivist approach to research lay a variety of assumptions. First, society is determined by how we act in everyday life. Any changes in society come because people change the way they are acting (O'Donaghue, 2007). Second, there is choice in action – people create their own activity. Third, activity almost always includes interaction with others. People interpret behavior of others, as others interpret their behavior. Finally, our actions require negotiation of meaning, which modifies our understanding (O'Donaghue, 2007). In interpretivist research, reality is multiple and socially constructed. The goal is to understand rather than predict behavior. Understanding motives, meanings, and subjective experience is important in interpretivist research. In interpretivist research, there is an assumption that people construct their own understanding, which means multiple realities exist (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 2009). Each participant's reality is unique, and the narratives may not coincide, as experiences and knowledge vary from person to person. Finally, I considered that my own experiences and values shaped my interactions and analysis with my participants and data. I believe in the transformative powers of education. With regard to doctoral education, I understand there are a multitude of reasons why people leave doctoral programs; some are very personal in nature and others can be caused by factors outside of the student's control.

Theoretical Perspective and Framework

As Broido and Manning (2002) said, "Research cannot be conducted without the conscious use of underlying theoretical perspectives" (p. 434) which guide the methodology used (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). A theoretical framework also helps to focus the reader to the topic in which the researcher is ultimately interested (Merriam, 2009); in this case, the reasons participants attribute to their action of leaving a doctoral program. The theoretical framework that guided the application of the study was attribution theory. Social psychology describes attribution as the process individuals use to explain the causes of behavior and events (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2010). For individuals, understanding why something might happen helps the person to control the outcome or predict when it might occur (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). In particular, Bernard Weiner (1972) developed a three-stage process underlying attribution. First, a behavior must be observed or perceived. Then, that behavior must be intentional. Finally, the behavior is attributed to internal or external causes. Weiner (1972) felt the most important factors affecting these attributions were ability, effort, the difficulty of the task, and luck. Attributions are then categorized along three dimensions. Is the control internal or external (locus)? Do causes change over time (stability)? Who controls the cause (controllability)? These attributions can be internal, focused on some sort of characteristic, or external, focused on something in the situation or environment (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Weiner's (1972) research found people were more likely to attribute their successes to their own skills and choices, and their failures to situational factors rather than their own skills and choices.

An interpretivist framework with attribution theory was a good fit for the proposed research for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the research question "To what do people who voluntarily depart from doctoral programs in higher education attribute their departure?," lent itself to a framework that considered the meaning doctoral students gave to their departure experience. This study sought to understand the behavior of departure from doctoral programs rather than to predict why or which students might be at risk for departure.

Methods

The general strategy for inquiry helps to determine appropriate research methods (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Procedures and techniques for choosing participants, collecting and analyzing data, and sharing findings are all important pieces to determine (Creswell, 2007). Given my topic, I chose to interview selected participants, and to analyze the data using open and axial coding.

Participants

Given an interpretive approach to doctoral attrition, it was imperative to speak with multiple people who had chosen to leave their programs and who could describe the lived experience of doctoral attrition. After gaining Institutional Review Board approval to conduct the study (see Appendix A), I used criterion and snowball sampling to find 15 participants who experienced the phenomenon of doctoral departure within the last ten years. Participants were chosen intentionally with an effort to find those who could share significantly regarding the given topic (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). I posted on the Facebook group "Student Affairs Professionals", as well as my personal Twitter and Facebook pages to find participants, or suggestions of participants in my networks. I

chose this public Facebook group because there are over 25,000 people with an interest in student affairs work, including faculty, current and past doctoral students, and administrators that may be able to refer me to possible participants. There have been past discussions of leaving doctoral programs in the group, leading me to believe it would be a fruitful place to find participants. In addition, I chose to reach out through a social media platform because I believed I would gain wider access to a variety of participants. Had I reached out solely to graduate programs, I believed it fairly likely that students who left their doctoral programs under negative circumstances may not be too eager to maintain their contact information with the department. Though there are limitations such as access and interest in social media platforms, it did prove to be a good resource for this study. All participants were initially contacted via email with information about the study, as well as screening questions to ensure they met the criteria for the study (see Appendix B).

Selection process. Specifically, the criteria included people who began a doctoral program in higher education and student affairs in the United States, completed at least one semester in the program, and chose to leave their program without completing the degree. I wanted participants to have completed a full semester in their program so that they had at least a few months of experience to draw upon, with an opportunity to interact with their program, and the supports available. Their departure was to be within the past decade (2006-2016), so their recollections were somewhat recent. Students who were asked by their departments to leave the program were not considered, but students who left in anticipation of being asked to leave by their departments were. A student may have incorrectly anticipated a request for departure due

to their own impostor feelings that may differ from the department's perspective on the student's performance, and I felt their voice should be represented as well. Additionally, I did not recruit or accept participants from my own program of study.

The call for participants yielded 83 total responses. Forty potential participants were immediately eliminated because their doctoral program was not in higher education and student affairs (8), they completed the doctoral degree (15), or they were still attending their program (17). This left forty-three useable responses. Another eight respondents did not wish to be contacted, and seven other respondents were from my own doctoral program, so I then contacted the remaining twenty-eight potential participants via email. Thirteen people did not respond to this contact, leaving fifteen people willing to spend an hour or so talking to me about their experiences in doctoral education. These participants ranged from one year to ten years departed from their doctoral program, with a broad spread of departure throughout the decade. Just under half of the participants were in their mid-forties, though participants ranged from 30-59 years of age.

I had hoped to have racial and ethnic diversity, as well as gender diversity. When I sent out my call for participants, I received numerous responses that appeared to display a variety of diverse people; however, when it came time to conduct interviews, many of these potential participants chose not to participate. I am not sure why they chose not to participate, but hopefully future research can address this limitation. In addition, perhaps other researchers may be able to access participants in areas I was not comfortable invading, such as identity based social media networks like "BLKSAP (Black Student Affairs Professionals)".

All interview participants signed a consent form (see Appendix D for sample form). The table below includes basic details for each participant, using the terms they chose for their identities. The table also indicates general geographic area, institution type, and Carnegie research classification (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, n.d.) for all participants.

Table 1

Participant Details

Name	Racial/Ethnic Identity	Gender	Age	PT/ FT*	Time Since Departure (in years)	Location	Institutional Type	Carnegie Research Classification
Amy	White	Cisgender female	40-49	PT	2	South	Public	Highest
Bailey	Caucasian	Female	40-49	PT	1	Online	Private for-profit	Moderate
Becky	Caucasian	Female	50-59	PT	10	Mid-Atlantic	Private not-for-profit	Highest
Beverly	White	Woman	**	FT	7	Midwest	Public	Highest
Carol	White	Female	40-49	PT	4^	Mid-Atlantic	Private not-for-profit	Highest
Francine	White/Alaska Native	Female	40-49	PT	5	Mid-Atlantic	Public	Highest
Ignatius	Latina	Female	40-49	FT	9^	Mid-Atlantic	Public	Highest
Jackie	White	Female	30-39	PT	9	Mid-Atlantic	Public	Higher
Mark	African-American	Male	50-59	PT	5	Midwest	Public	Highest
Phoebe	White	Female	50-59	PT	2	South	Public	Highest
Renee	White	Female	50-59	PT	4	Midwest	Public	Higher
Scott	White	Male	30-39	PT	6	South	Public	Highest
Skyler	White	Female	40-49	PT	8	West	Public	Highest
Trish	White/Caucasian	Female	30-39	FT	1	Midwest	Public	Higher
Xavier	White	Male	40-49	PT	5^	Northeast	Public	Highest

*Part-time (PT) or Full-time (FT) attendance, for the majority of time enrolled

** did not provide age

^ Left in anticipation of being asked to leave

Interviews

Interviews are an oft-used method of data collection in qualitative research. Interviews are "a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (deMarrais, 2004, p. 55). Interviewing is an appropriate method when the researcher cannot directly observe behavior, feelings, or interpretations (Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured interviews are designed with a flexible protocol, allowing for a fluid structure, where there is no determined order or wording to the questions (Merriam, 2009). In designing the questions, I aimed for data that provided rich and thick description of the phenomenon of doctoral program departure (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Semi-structured interviews also allow researchers to have a general focus for the interview, while being able to explore topics the participant brings up (Merriam, 2009). I conducted semi-structured interviews, ranging from twenty to ninety minutes in length, with participants about their experiences. I selected a sample of 15 participants based on the people who filled out the initial screening survey and met the criteria for the study. Though there is never a number in qualitative research that defines data saturation, I aimed to interview participants from a variety of institution types and professional circumstances to provide replicability and breadth of answers (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I designed the interview questions from the literature review and aimed to discover how participants may be similar to previously researched participants, as well as exploring the nuances of higher education that merited this additional study (see appendix C for sample interview questions). When I found myself seeing similar answers across

participants with a variety of experiences, I felt I had reached an appropriate level of data saturation for this dissertation study.

Data Analysis

Determining methods of analysis was another critical part of designing this study. The meaning-making process is often considered cyclical in nature, rather than a linear model (Creswell, 2007). Often, researchers will collect data, analyze, collect more data, analyze how that fits in with previous data, etc. After completing an interview with each participant, I transcribed the interview verbatim, then read the entire transcript a few times to gain an overall sense of the interview before delving in further (Creswell, 2007). I used open coding, reading through the transcripts and noting various experiences relating to doctoral attrition. I used these codes to identify and develop concepts to be compared for similarities and differences (O'Donaghue, 2007, Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding involves carefully considering the words used by participants to share their experiences regarding doctoral attrition, allowing me to explore my own assumptions about doctoral attrition as well as those of my participants (O'Donaghue, 2007). When I initially read through the transcripts, I noted a variety of codes. I separated these into internal and external factors. Internal factors included ability, self-confidence, personal goals, drive, and self-discipline. External factors included location, program, committee, advisor, family, time limits, job, "life," financial, and external support. Once I came up with these codes, I used axial coding to make connections between categories, their contexts, strategies, and consequences (O'Donaghue, 2007). Here, I found myself considering incompatibility between program and participant, the importance of relationship in doctoral education, blaming some aspect of the program for not

completing the degree, and recognizing their own shortcomings. These concepts helped solidify connections between categories, allowing me to come up with the ultimate themes of the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Throughout the analysis process, I followed Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) suggestions for data analysis, which included focusing on data that answered my research question, honing in on data that helped to understand the attributions doctoral departers make. I noted comments as I went about what I was seeing and learning as I researched, and continued to refer back to the literature on doctoral attrition and attribution theory to make connections to what my participants were sharing.

Using attribution theory (Weiner, 1972), I considered locus, stability, and controllability of departure for each of my participants. In other words, how did participants believe their departure behavior came about? Did they feel their departure was something in their control (e.g. academic performance, choice to pursue a different career)? Or was their departure because of something outside of their control (e.g. family pressures, expectation they would be asked to leave, move to a different location)? Though my research question specifically focused on departure, I also asked a question about colleagues who may have completed the degree; this provided perspective as to what participants attribute successful achievement of the degree, and I considered its differences from their attributions of departure.

Finally, I articulated my interpretation and discussion of the findings in my dissertation document. As Merriam (2009) stated, "research is of little consequence if no one knows about it; other practitioners have no way to benefit from what the researcher

learned in doing the study" (p. 237). I have attempted to balance description with interpretation, and evidence with its analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

Ultimately, it was important that my research provide information that is useful to higher education faculty and doctoral students. Providing generalizability to all doctoral programs was certainly not an aim of this research, but I do want others to be confident in my process and findings regarding doctoral attrition (Merriam, 2009). In addition, I want readers to feel confident in applying and transferring my findings to other appropriate contexts.

Validity refers to how the findings align with reality (Merriam, 2009). Do the findings make sense, given the data presented? Qualitative research is not designed to be reliable in a sense of replicability, but rather in "whether the results are consistent with the data collected" (Merriam, 2009, p. 221). "Though interpretation is never right or wrong" (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 129), I carefully show how my interpretation came about and why readers should trust it. I used member checks to gain feedback from my participants regarding the themes that emerged during analysis by sharing my findings with participants. When I shared my findings, participant responses ranged from "This looks very comprehensive!" to "Yes, you covered it all!" and "I believe communication issues and negative department relationships were the primary themes from my experience. From my direct experience, I do not see anything missing." The participants felt their attributions of their decision to depart were comprehensively and fairly covered in my findings. By asking participants for feedback, they were able to help validate my findings and pointed out any misinterpretations (Merriam, 2009).

Participants were able to see their experiences reflected in my interpretations (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) referred to the dissertation committee as a de facto peer examination, and I saw elements of this peer review throughout the dissertation process as well.

Transferability was another important criteria of my study. It is my hope that readers of this dissertation study will be able to understand why participants leave doctoral programs. Readers may be able to make sense of their own experiences or those of their students, or perhaps make changes in their own doctoral programs that might address problematic attrition. Though generalizability is, again, not a general aim of qualitative research, I worked toward providing extrapolations (Patton, 2014). Such extrapolations can help the reader consider what might happen under similar circumstances. To assist the reader in such extrapolations, I provided a rich, thick description of the setting and findings.

Finally, many of the criteria for validity and reliability helped me to ensure my study was ethical in nature. I did not aim to judge anyone's reasons for leaving their doctoral program, and I tried my best to convey that to my participants. Also, I have done my best to ensure participant responses are confidential, and that my writing provides them with anonymity. Further, in reviewing the data I gathered, I recognized the vulnerability of my participants in sharing their experiences regarding a decision that is typically seen as a failure – the decision to leave a doctoral program. Because of their vulnerability, I initially found I was uncomfortable sharing my own concerns regarding various parts of participants' stories. If I shared a story that made my participants look bad, how might that impact them moving forward? If my perception of an event did not

match their characterization, did that mean my perceptions were invalid? Or did that mean that my perceptions were simply another perspective on what must have been a difficult situation? Questioning how one's writing will impact the participants is certainly not a new concept in qualitative research, though. Writing in a way that silences the participants' stories, and silencing myself by writing in such an objective fashion would be contrary to the aims of qualitative research (Gilgun, 2005). In my analysis, I aimed to completely separate my perceptions from the participants', and do not judge my participants for any decisions or actions they may have taken that were different from how I might have reacted in the same situation.

Summary

There was a critical need for research on doctoral attrition within HESA populations. Students who pursue the terminal degree in education are significantly different from the general population of doctoral students, and face different challenges. This research provided a lens into why doctoral students in HESA programs leave their doctoral degrees, and the results of the research added to the literature on doctoral attrition. By sharing the participants' stories, my hope is that those involved with doctoral programs will consider ways to support doctoral students toward completion, as well as understanding the many positive reasons students leave programs without completing the terminal degree.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

When I began speaking with my participants, I wanted to understand how they got to their graduate program and to where they are currently in higher education. I believed this would give me an understanding of how they viewed education and their role in the profession of higher education and student affairs. Through my interview protocol, I delved into a number of questions about their doctoral program experiences and the choices they made throughout the process. To provide clarity to the participants' stories, I share these vignettes below.

Amy

As an undergraduate student, Amy worked in residence life for three years and became interested in higher education. She realized she no longer wanted to pursue her undergraduate major of education, so she changed her major, which required her to complete an additional year. Following graduation, Amy enrolled in a master's degree in higher education at a public university in the southern United States. Since completing her master's degree, Amy has worked in residence life for her entire career, spanning public and private institutions, as well as privatized student housing.

She decided to pursue a terminal degree because she felt it would be necessary to move up in her career. However, Amy kept postponing pursuit of a doctorate until she

believed she was in a place that would allow her the flexibility needed to complete her studies. She thought she was disciplined enough to get the work done and in a position in her life where she believed she could attend a couple of classes a semester. She chose her program mostly due to proximity; the program was a commutable distance from where she worked. She was not interested in online programs, citing a need for the discipline of a classroom. After looking at the programs in her area, she chose a program with a higher education focus (rather than the adult education program at another institution). During her degree, Amy worked from about 8am until 3pm at her office, and then attended classes in the evenings. When she was not in class on a particular evening, she would use those evenings to complete any projects or reading that needed to be done. Amy spent about two to three hours each day on her doctoral studies. She felt she was much more structured when she pursued her doctoral degree than she was in her master's program. In her master's program, Amy "made things happen" by pulling all-nighters and powering through. Now in a doctoral program, "As a part-time student and working full-time, I didn't have that luxury," she shared. She felt her experience as a doctoral student was far less harried than her master's program.

When Amy reflected on positive experiences in her doctoral program, she indicated that she really benefitted from positive feedback on her academic writing. She also appreciated getting to know her classmates, as she took courses with people who were in a variety of education doctoral programs in the department. She valued getting to interact with people working in different areas of K-12 and higher education. Finally, she enjoyed working with her faculty members; they came from strong research backgrounds, were very personable, and gave good feedback. Amy's proudest moment in her program

was during her higher education law class; she was able to "hold her own" in class discussions because she really enjoyed the material and did well in the class. She was also excited to see her hard work come to fruition, and valued the sense of accomplishment and ability she felt when she did well.

However, she felt like her program provided very little support, especially for students pursuing the degree part-time. Her advisor was an administrator in the college; she did not feel she received much guidance about her future directions. Her most negative experience was receiving feedback on her comprehensive exams. She felt like she barely passed the exam, and her feedback reflected her struggles.

When asked what led Amy to leave her program, she thoughtfully responded and said, "I've always said it was the job, but I was getting pretty burned out even before my job changed." Her company gave her the opportunity to relocate, and she had been struggling with burnout in her academics. She intended to take an incomplete in a class but after she moved, she realized she would not complete her degree. Amy recognized the choices she made in pursuing her career directly put a stop to her doctoral studies.

When I asked Amy about her perspectives of other students, she thought her colleagues who finished the degree had greater self-discipline. Additionally, most of the other students she knew were pursuing the doctoral degree full-time and may have had a teaching or research assistantship, but not a full-time job. She also mentioned her colleagues were more willing to sacrifice in their lives to complete the degree, and that she was only willing to sacrifice so much. Amy also found herself considering the impact of a supportive partner; many of the people she knew that had finished the degree had a supportive partner to help with some of the "life" things that continue to happen

while pursuing the degree. This could have been as simple as someone to cook dinner at night, or clean the house on the weekend. Amy said she did not have a partner at this time to shoulder some of the household tasks.

After Amy decided to take an incomplete in a class, she felt significantly relieved. Once she moved to her new city and began her new position, she quickly realized she was not going to complete her degree. She was disappointed she could not make it work, but felt it was the right thing to do for her career. She also mentioned she is glad she does not have any student loan debt from her time in doctoral studies, and that if she had gone into debt, she might have felt differently.

Bailey

Bailey's path to higher education was similar to many other participants in that immediately after completing her undergraduate degree, she went on to pursue a master's degree in higher education. She completed an assistantship as a part of her degree. After finishing her master's, Bailey worked in residence life and student activities, and now serves as a senior student affairs officer. She chose to pursue a doctorate because she was interested in becoming a dean or vice president, and did not feel either goal would be realistic without completing the doctorate. "I was never really passionate about going back and getting my doctorate. Even when I went back, it was a means to an end," she shared. She said she did it because she "wanted a better job." The timing seemed right because she had been in her role for about three years and felt comfortable with her job responsibilities, she had a supportive partner and no children, and her employer would pay for her degree. She knew she was not intending on staying in the same geographic

region so focused her program search on low-residency programs that would allow her to move around the country as necessary.

When Bailey was enrolled in her program, she found it was much different than when she had pursued her master's degree because her personal life situation changed. She was balancing a spouse as well as a full-time executive-level position with her schoolwork, and eventually added a child into the mix. She was glad her advisor and faculty were supportive and provided online office hours to help manage. That said, she struggled with what she felt were lengthy delays in responses from her committee. However, her biggest challenges were related to finances, especially when she moved from the geographic region she was in, as this now required her to pay her own tuition. Her negative experiences were specifically linked to financial concerns.

Bailey really enjoyed the short-term residencies required by her program; she was able to spend about two weeks focusing on coursework with her colleagues. She is still in contact with many of those classmates. Her proudest moment was when she passed her oral comprehensive exams, since she was pretty nervous about them. She also received a certificate for advanced graduate study, though she was unsure why or how she had received it.

During her dissertation, Bailey and her partner had a child born with medical needs. Bailey had taken a leave of absence over the summer to be with her newborn baby. When her child was born, her daughter had additional medical needs that took significantly more time and finances than Bailey had anticipated, leading to an extended absence. The absence resulted in a request from her department to retake the

comprehensive exams as well as some coursework, which Bailey was unable and unwilling to do.

When I asked Bailey about her colleagues, she could not immediately think of any other people who had started a doctoral program and not finished. She mentioned many of her colleagues that had finished had done so by financing their degree through their employer. She also noted her colleagues' passion for earning the terminal degree. When Bailey decided to leave her program, she immediately felt her financial pressures diminish, and was able to spend additional time with her child. Ultimately, Bailey did not regret her decision to leave – she regretted her decision to begin and to incur financial debt because of the degree.

Becky

A self-proclaimed late starter in the field, Becky found a position in residence life during her master's degree in social science. She was a single parent living in student housing when an assistant hall director position became available. Because of the free room and board benefits, Becky felt like it was a good opportunity, and quickly fell in love with the field of higher education. She worked professionally in residence life, including privatized student housing, for a number of years, and also worked in student activities. She chose to pursue a doctoral degree primarily for personal fulfillment, but also because her undergraduate and master's degrees were in other disciplines, which she found to be a challenge when applying for jobs in higher education. She felt regardless of her significant experience in higher education, her lack of an academic credential effectively caused her to be disqualified from numerous positions. She had considered a second master's degree in higher education, but her mentors encouraged her to pursue the

doctorate instead. She chose her program because it had a good reputation and allowed her to work full-time while completing. Her program was not at the main campus, but at an extended campus location.

Becky found herself having to pick her priorities carefully as a doctoral student. She needed to plan for two to three hours of study time each night so that she could keep her focus on her job during the workday. Because of the nature of her role, she also needed to manage significant extra-curricular activities such as student organization meetings and events. "Trying to balance things was a lot harder. I found that if things gave, it was the housework or the laundry…That all tended to get caught up one weekend a month," she said.

Becky did not feel her doctoral institution provided much support to her since she was at a satellite location for her studies. However, she felt this led to a strong cohort experience. She took classes with other students for three years with the same instructors, which led to strong bonds and significant familiarity with work styles from the faculty. In fact, her most positive experience in the program was her cohort. She talked about quickly learning who the hard workers and slackers were – and that the faculty were aware of these people as well. It made time management easier for Becky when she knew she had a slacker in her group, because she was then able to budget extra time in to make sure all parts of the project were completed. She felt a sense of collegiality among her cohort that they had been working together for three years and they were proud of one another's accomplishments.

Becky's proudest moment was when she completed her oral exams. Her exams required her to take what she had learned in the classroom and find the tie-ins among the

material. However, Becky's most negative moment was finding out her advisor had suddenly left the program, and no one at her institution notified her. She was unable to find a new advisor to continue working with to complete her degree.

When asked about the completion or departure of others, Becky mentioned some had left due to unforeseen circumstances, such as legal problems or health issues. She felt older students in her program simply had life and personal issues that came up that required their departure. Becky noted the ones that finished the degree were the younger members of the group, with fewer issues or distractions. She perceived they had chosen simpler topics for their dissertation and/or they had advisors who were much more invested in their completion of the degree. When Becky left her program, she immediately transitioned into a different position that was busy, which did not leave her much time to reflect on her departure. However, reflecting during our interview, she felt like she still had something to complete.

Beverly

Beverly came to the United States as an international student to pursue her undergraduate degree. While she was at her undergraduate institution, she became involved in residence life, and found her involvement there to be the most influential experience in her academic career. She pursued professional residence life positions after graduation. After a year of working professionally, Beverly decided to pursue a master's degree in higher education. She then worked in residence life for about five years before her work visa expired and she needed to return to her home country.

During her time at home, Beverly decided to pursue a doctoral degree because she was interested in becoming a faculty member. She was interested in teaching and did not

feel she wanted to work with younger students. She was not sold on the field of higher education, but decided to pursue a higher education degree because she felt she would be more competitive for highly ranked programs that would lead to tenure-track faculty positions. She did a significant amount of research to find programs, going to multiple conferences in the field to meet with admissions representatives and students in the program. She narrowed down her list of selected schools and ended up choosing an institution in the United States with family close by.

Beverly was a full-time student in her doctoral program with a research assistantship. Her program offered classes held during the day, so she would balance her classroom needs with her assistantship. However, Beverly admitted she immediately started to procrastinate and avoid her work because she was uninterested in the content of the courses and disengaged from the material. She missed deadlines with her homework assignments and in her research assistantship.

Beverly did not find the resources of her program very helpful; however, her institution had a number of resources she chose to pursue, including mental health counseling. Her counseling helped her come to the determination that leaving the program was the best decision for her. However, Beverly was a bit frustrated when she told her advisor she was planning to leave. Reflecting back, Beverly wished someone had made more of an effort to find out why she wanted to leave the program instead of simply writing her off. On the other hand, she admits she would not have been very receptive to anyone trying to change her decision.

Beverly's most positive experience in her doctoral program was her research assistantship and training. She felt these things truly prepared her well for her current

position. Her proudest moment also related to her internship. Beverly was responsible for coordinating significant pieces of research travel and training for her colleagues. However, her negative experiences came in the classroom. She admitted when she spoke to students at conferences prior to choosing her program, a few mentioned the teaching was not high-caliber. Beverly felt she could deal with this, but quickly found herself frustrated at courses she perceived to be poorly taught, poorly organized, and poorly sequenced. She did make an effort to take courses outside of her department and found those courses to be fantastic.

Beverly knew quickly the program was not working out for a number of reasons, but she also knew she could not simply walk away, as that would mean she would need to return to her home country. She looked ahead to comprehensive exams with dread, doubting her ability to be self-disciplined enough to complete the examinations successfully. Unlike most of the other participants, Beverly needed to figure out the logistics of leaving her program as an international student, since she wanted to remain in the United States.

Though Beverly took responsibility for the lack of self-discipline and unhappiness that contributed to her departure, she also felt there were many systemic failures in her program. She did not feel her program provided support (though admitted the institution did provide various supports), and thought potential students needed to be aware of the lack of support and the need for self-drive to complete the program she attended. She shared a colleague had left her program because she was fully intending on continuing in student affairs administration and received a lot of "flack" from students and faculty members for her decision.

For students Beverly knew who completed the degree, she felt many of them just had stronger desire to complete the degree, or a higher level of interest in research. "They get data, and they get excited, they do any interview, they want to look at the transcript as soon as possible to see what the themes are," she said. They also had the political savvy to navigate tricky situations in the department.

Beverly felt as though there was some sort of solidarity among those who have chosen to leave their doctoral programs, though – a sense of kinship. She has occasionally felt frustrated that others she perceived as weaker students were able to complete the degree. "How could they have a Ph.D. and I don't?" she asked. She knew she was relieved when she decided to leave her program, and knew it was the right choice for her to leave. However, Beverly often wonders about the what-ifs. What if she had attended a different institution? What if she had chosen a different academic field for her Ph.D.?

Carol

Carol has pursued what she perceived to be a traditional residence life career path. After her bachelor's degree, she immediately pursued a master's degree and after its completion, worked in residence life professionally. She found herself working closely with faculty in her role and often felt like her work in student affairs was not taken seriously by many faculty. She believed the terminal degree would give her some credibility to "sit at the table," so to speak. She also believed the terminal degree would help with career progression, both in an academic sense as well as adding a competitiveness to her résumé. She chose her program because it was located at a nearby

institution, she could work full-time while completing the degree, and her employer provided a tuition remission benefit.

Carol's program was quite flexible, with many weekend courses that met once or twice a month. She typically was not attending class on a weekly basis. In fact, many of her colleagues would fly in from around the country for the one or two weekends a month of coursework. This made any sort of group work an additional challenge, requiring the use of email and Skype to manage project requirements. Carol cut out most of her social activities during this time, and dedicated her weekends to studying for her courses. She also had a second job during this time working as a research assistant. Carol then found the importance of using her annual leave to support her studies. She often dedicated her annual leave to her academic schedule, looking to see if especially stressful times were around the corner (e.g. comprehensive exams), and would take time off from work to focus solely on her schoolwork.

Carol's program had a cohort system, so she was able to rely on others as support systems. The department also provided sessions to talk about how to navigate doctoral education, such as how relationships with others might be affected by taking on this new venture. Carol really appreciated these sessions, as they helped her to consider a variety of aspects. Carol's most positive experience in her doctoral program was being a part of a research team (her second job). This helped to strengthen her skills in qualitative research; she was also able to publish and present on a national level. Her proudest moments were her national presentations.

However, Carol's most negative experiences often related to similar issues. She mentioned her cohort as a positive initially, but also spoke about how it felt like a

competition to find faculty to be on her doctoral committee. She also ran into challenges with members of her committee retiring or leaving the institutions for other opportunities. These changes affected the direction of her study significantly, requiring multiple rewrites and changes in methodology to meet their needs. Carol admits these changes were likely exacerbated by her decision to take a job in a different geographic area; she was not able to do many face-to-face meetings.

Carol partially attributed her departure to these factors, but also spoke about her parents becoming ill and mother ultimately passing away during her pursuit. She also discussed a particular situation where she flew in to meet with her advisor and was told her advisor's assistant was "supposed to call [her]" to reschedule the meeting. She continued to run into these roadblocks impeding her progress and reached a point where she was "so sick of it," and "just done."

When asked about her colleagues, Carol shared many of her classmates had not finished their doctoral degrees. She simply saw it as part of the process. People left because they did not have good relationships with the faculty, they got promotions, or decided to spend more time on their work. She also mentioned she understood how people could get stuck as ABD (All But Dissertation), as that could be isolating. She said the people in her program who did finish did so mostly because they had faculty members committed to their completion. She saw others complete the degree that she felt were clearly not strong students, but shared her perception that the faculty member was simply more invested.

After Carol chose to leave her program, she still found her engagement in literature, research, and the academic side of student affairs to be of great importance.

She is significantly involved in her university's higher education program. Though she was initially negative about her decision to depart, she now thinks her experiences in her doctoral program have provided her many opportunities. She still feels like she is able to contribute to the body of research in the field as well. She also mentioned her health and social life are much better now. "I have friends! I watch football! I do yoga!," she exclaimed. She has considered going back to complete her doctorate, but is reticent to give up the newfound freedom and activities she has.

Francine

Francine's path to higher education was a bit different than most other participants. Francine completed her undergraduate degree and moved to the southeastern part of the United States. She decided to return to her home state and, due to her (non-higher education) field's need for local certifications, she took a job at a university to pay the bills while she was working on those certifications. She worked with graduate students in an academic department, and did this work for quite some time, achieving another master's degree during the interim. However, she quickly realized she was more interested in working with students than returning to her previous field. She then found herself fascinated by college student development. After taking a few courses in the discipline at her institution, she found a faculty member doing research that was interesting to her.

For Francine, she felt like the option was available, so she might as well do it. "It certainly wasn't a deliberate 'I want a Ph.D. and I'm going to find the best program for me…I fell into it," she said. Her understanding of graduate programs, from her own professional position, was that students would find one particular individual they were

interested in working with, and then they would apply to specific institutions. If the faculty member left the program, the student would leave as well.

When Francine was enrolled in her program, she found herself balancing her full time job with her academic requirements differently throughout the year. She spent most of her time during the work day working with students, paperwork, faculty, and curricular issues, and did not find herself even thinking about her doctoral work until later in the afternoon. Most of her classes began in the late afternoon and went into the evening. She tried to take only one class a night, and two classes a term. She found herself reading quite a bit more just to stay up to date with the reading requirements. She often felt she was underprepared and that her colleagues all seemed to have it completely together. An interesting piece for Francine was that during the day, she worked closely with her academic advisor in a professional capacity, but in the evening, she was his student, which made for an awkward relationship.

Francine did not feel her doctoral program provided many supports. Most of her classmates were employees of the institution, so they were receiving tuition waivers for the coursework, so there were not many assistantship positions available. Francine noticed the program was fairly weak within the institution and often could not compete for the institutional funding available. She was surprised at the lack of connection to policy and research institutes outside of the institution, as they were geographically very close to many national groups in the field of higher education.

Francine's most positive experience in her doctoral program was actually after she chose to leave her program. She had decided to "master out," or complete the coursework for a master's degree instead of the doctorate. During her time to complete

the master's degree, new faculty were hired that ended up being incredible supports to Francine as she pursued her professional career. Her proudest moment was also after she left her doctoral program. Francine had an opportunity to present at a national conference, but had been given a waiver that meant she did not have to take a course on presentations as a part of her program. She was able to take the skills she had learned from earlier coursework to be able to create the necessary poster and put together a strong presentation that she is still contacted about years later. Conversely, Francine's most negative experience was that she felt her program left her alone to figure things out. "There was just a complete lack of advising until you figured out what you wanted to do, and you figured out who the people were that did that, and you had to track them down," she shared.

Ultimately, Francine left her program because she no longer had an advisor in a focus area she was interested in. Because of her previous professional experience, she believed her advisor's shift in focus meant she either needed to go along with said shift (in which she was not interested), she needed to find another advisor, or she needed to leave the program. Francine's decision was to complete a master's degree and be done. When asked about her colleagues who finished, Francine shared she knew of a number of people who simply did not finish the dissertation. "Life gets in the way," she said. People have kids, move jobs, lose focus. "I don't know that it's that they deliberately walk away," Francine shared. She felt like those finished their degrees were likely more confident in their abilities, and their advisors stuck around.

When Francine decided to leave her program, she immediately felt less stressed out. However, through her time in the master's program, Francine grew more frustrated,

realizing the faculty members she now worked with would have been very supportive of her in a doctoral program, and she might have actually finished the degree. However, she knows leaving was the right decision for her at that time. It allowed her to pursue many opportunities she would not have otherwise had.

Ignatius

Ignatius found higher education "like any good old college student," working as an orientation assistant while an undergraduate student. She pursued a master's degree after finishing her undergraduate degree, but decided she was no longer interested in writing papers. Years later, she found herself writing annual reports and realized she might as well get something out of her writing. Her primary mentors both had terminal degrees and a strong career path. Ignatius thought she would need to pursue a doctorate to be able to be a decision-maker in higher education, and to impact students at a high level. She did a significant amount of research to determine program throughout the country with strong reputations. She spent two years applying to programs, and ultimately interviewed with two institutions. She chose her program due to geographic location as well as job possibilities for her partner.

A week before her first class, Ignatius gave birth to her first child. She had intended on attending school full-time, but cut back to part-time during the initial months of her child's life. "It was full-time mom, part-time student, full-time spouse," she said. She spent a lot of time reading and writing. She felt her program was very supportive and she was able to do what she needed to get through those first few months. Though she did not feel like the institution provided much support, she was thankful for the flexibility of the faculty in her program. She always felt like she had many people who

could answer questions or help connect her with resources. During her program, Ignatius had a graduate assistantship in a student services office on campus. She also tried to be very intentional in understanding the academic portion of her work, taking time to consider how her coursework had or could apply for her as a practitioner.

Ignatius had many positive moments in her degree program. The cohort and faculty were incredibly supportive, and she had many opportunities throughout. She put together a presentation with colleagues regarding the middle student – students who were not honors or high achieving, nor on academic probation and struggling, and felt this presentation was a strong example of theory to practice. Her most proud moment was when she completed her advanced statistics course. She said the first time she enrolled in the course, she dropped the class. Being able to complete both required statistics courses required by her program and understanding the concepts gave her a significant sense of accomplishment. Her most negative experience in her program was her comprehensive exams. She felt there was a disconnect between what she was expected to produce in her response and the reality she had seen and been a part of. She did not pass her first attempt at the exams, and then failed her retake attempt as well. She felt she knew and understood the material, but the comprehensive exam did not give her the opportunity to display her knowledge.

When asked why others left their programs, Ignatius indicated a colleague simply did not want to retake her failed comprehensive exams, and the other colleague struggled in the dissertation writing process with conflict with her advisor. For those who finished the degree, Ignatius believed it was primarily due to perseverance after passing the

"comps hurdle." They also had at least one other person beside the advisor and themselves that was supportive of their completion.

When Ignatius decided to leave, she said it felt like she was mourning a loss at first. Her priorities and potential future career path had shifted away from higher education administration and she realized the terminal degree was no longer something she needed. She values the relationships developed throughout her time in the doctoral program, and encourages others considering a program, "Don't do it for anyone else. Do it for you."

Jackie

During Jackie's undergraduate education, she was set on going to law school. However, her advisor said, "You're not going to do well in law school." While initially shocked, Jackie shared her advisor then said she needed to consider higher education, because of her passion for the work she was doing on campus. She had not previously realized higher education as an option. Jackie applied to graduate schools in higher education and pursued a master's degree after her baccalaureate.

After her degree, Jackie began working with orientation and first-year programs. A couple of years into her position, she decided to enroll in a doctoral program. She took a few courses as a non-degree seeking student and then applied to and was accepted in the doctoral program. She chose to pursue the terminal degree because she was interested in serving as a senior student affairs administrator and felt the terminal degree was a necessity for promotion. When she considered programs, she looked at programs that were geographically close, considering traffic and commute time were factors in her

decision. Additionally, her employer would partially pay for courses at the institution she chose.

Typical days for Jackie involved her full time position during the day, and then night courses. When she did not have classes, she would often go to her doctoral institution and spend time in the library working on research. She also headed to campus on the weekends as well. She found herself negotiating time management, but also considered her job responsibilities in scheduling her courses. For instance, as an orientation professional, she did not enroll in any summer courses.

Jackie was not immediately aware of any supports the university or the department provided, but valued the wisdom of her colleagues as a positive experience in her program. She took courses with professionals working in K-12 education as well, and often found their perspective helpful. This was both in the classroom as they considered topics, but also in her professional work, as she worked with first-year students. The perspectives of her colleagues helped her understand where her first-year students were coming from. Jackie's proudest moment was managing all of her responsibilities academically and personally. Jackie was unable to come up with a negative experience in her program; she mentioned her time limit to complete the degree had expired, and she found that frustrating, but it was not an overwhelmingly negative experience.

Jackie chose to depart from her program when she gave birth to her first child. She was unsure how she was going to manage her time with a newborn, classes, working, and a partner that also worked full time. "I thought I'd take some time off. And then time off has turned into – he just turned nine," she said. She said all of the other people she

knew in the program finished their degrees. She thought this was likely because they were in different parts of life than she was. They also had different support systems available that helped them progress.

Jackie said she simply did not think about it when she left her program. She was excited for her colleagues as they reached milestones, but did not miss it for herself. Though she wishes she would have finished the degree, she also knew in the moment she did not have the drive to commit to it. When asked if she would consider going back, she said, "I don't necessarily know if I would go back. Something would have to give, and I'm not sure what that would be."

Mark

Mark was a very involved student as an undergraduate, participating in campus organizations, Greek life, student government, and many other aspects of student affairs work. Immediately after he completed his undergraduate degree, Mark completed a master's degree in higher education. He then worked in multicultural student affairs, academic advising, and career services. He chose to pursue a doctoral degree because he saw it as beneficial to his career trajectory of becoming the director of a career center at the time. Mark chose his program because he was an employee of the institution (meaning he could receive tuition remission) and had taken a couple of courses as a non-degree seeking student, and then was admitted based on those factors.

Mark worked full-time while pursuing his doctorate degree. He would try to take at least one weekend course and one course during the week to balance out his workload a bit. A typical day for him consisted of his full time position during the day, and then a course at night. On a Friday, he would typically leave his office earlier to prepare for his

weekend courses. Most of his weekend courses only met one weekend a month, so he would plan to spend another weekend at the library studying, researching, and preparing for papers and presentations.

When I asked Mark about the supports provided, he said, "I always got the impression those were for full-time students." In addition, as an Ed.D. student, Mark often felt the supports that were available were designed for the students in the Ph.D. program offered by the same department. He was repeatedly told by faculty that his program was "different," but no one would really clarify what they meant by that. He also mentioned challenges with workshops that were only available during the workday, effectively rendering him unable to access the resources.

Mark's most positive experience in his doctoral program was working with his first advisor. He and his advisor put together a presentation for a national student affairs conference, which was accepted, and this was his proudest moment. He noted that passing qualifying exams may have been the proudest moment for other people, but admitted he failed his first attempt and found passing the subsequent exam to be anti-climactic. He actually characterized his qualifying exams as his most negative experience. Mark shared he heard quite a bit from faculty about how exams were not meeting expectations, but almost nothing in terms of why the exams were so poor.

Mark ended up leaving his position at the institution and moving to a different geographic area. He moved for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the economic downturn in the United States. He shared his decision to leave his program ultimately came about because he was so far away. He was unable to meet with his

advisor, unable to find someone who cared about what he was working on, and ultimately unable to find someone to help him through bureaucracy in filing time limit petitions.

When I asked Mark about others who left their programs, he shared stories of a few of his colleagues whose goals changed while in the program. One colleague was offered an opportunity to complete an executive Ed.D. in a much shorter timeline, and she jumped at the opportunity. Others left because of health programs, or job transitions. For those who finished the degree, Mark felt it was often because they were full-time students and very driven to complete, and they had someone who cared about their progress.

After Mark decided to leave his program, he felt relieved. He also felt a bit of shame in telling others that he was not going to complete the degree. He did not enroll for credit hours in the next semester. When he emailed his advisor to let her know he would not be continuing, Mark found her response a bit surprising – she simply shared that she was also leaving the institution. Mark actively considers returning to complete his doctorate, though at a different institution. He was actively applying for terminal degree programs at the time of our interview.

Phoebe

Phoebe was involved with sorority life as an undergraduate, and decided to complete a master's degree in higher education after her bachelor's degree. After completing her master's degree, Phoebe worked in residence life, and then moved into progressively more responsible roles in facility management and student activities. Phoebe never intended to pursue a doctoral degree, then decided about ten years ago it was something she was interested in, likely due to other colleagues pursuing the degree.

She admits it may have also been because she was "enamored of the title Doctor." She also thought the terminal degree may be necessary for career progression.

Phoebe chose her program because she was familiar with the program; she had earned her master's degree from the same institution. When she initially prepared to apply, she was worried about her standardized test scores, but the faculty encouraged her to apply, stating that her significant experience in the field was important and would count toward admission requirements. She was also able to use tuition assistance toward her courses, though she was working at a different institution.

Phoebe attended her courses as a part-time student, working full-time. She typically would spend one day a week at her graduate institution, taking two courses each semester. She used her vacation time and drove about two hours each way, often carpooling with her classmates. As she progressed in her program, she had more opportunities to take hybrid courses, so she would not have to drive to campus as much. When I asked about supports in the doctoral program, Phoebe shared her faculty were very cognizant that many of the students were full-time professionals. She saw the care faculty took to ensure scheduling made sense for those who were working full-time, offering multiple courses on one day. She was not immediately aware of any university level supports.

Phoebe's most positive experience was in her qualitative research class. She really enjoyed her class and felt like she connected strongly with qualitative research methods. Her proudest moment was when she finished a publishable paper – a requirement of her program. Her negative experiences often connected to her identity as an older individual. She had not been in school for quite some time, and often found

herself confused with technology. In addition, she found her relationship with her initial advisor to be a bit of a challenge. She actually got along quite well with her advisor, however, this did not translate well to an academic advising relationship, and she struggled with feeling lost and without direction.

Phoebe said she left her program because she "felt really dumb in the program compared to others." However, this seemed to be a self-perception, as she did not indicate receiving negative feedback or failure in any courses. She often felt intimidated by her colleagues in the program, even though she had significant experience in the field. She also struggled with self-discipline; after working all day, she found she had little energy to devote to reading and writing and staying on top of her academic work. She also was helping her aging parents and managing many of their needs as well. When she decided to leave her program, she sent her advisor an email, and then spoke with her via Skype. She found herself concerned about how others would perceive her decision to leave, and still feels a bit ashamed that she left.

When I asked Phoebe why she perceived others left their programs, she shared the one person she knew who had left had simply done so because he was content where he was and did not feel the need to complete the degree. She knew more people who finished the degree, and said many of those people had come straight through an undergraduate degree, into a master's degree, and then the terminal degree. She felt like their goals for the terminal degree might have been more solidified, and they were better able to cope through challenges.

Renee

Renee has been an academic advisor for her entire career in higher education. She started as a part-time employee and was actually only intending it as a stop-gap until she finished another degree. However, the other degree did not work out professionally and she has been advising full-time since that point. Shortly after a divorce, Renee was looking for intellectual stimulation, and found a philosophy of education course that piqued her interest. She figured she "might as well" get a Ph.D. in education since the tuition costs were minimal. She chose her program because the courses looked interesting, and it seemed like something she might want to pursue.

Renee would go to work in the mornings and then take two to three classes a semester. The courses were offered in the evenings, which gave her time to work during the day, and then work on papers on the nights she did not have class. She did not believe she did anything differently as a doctoral student, other than adding a little bit of extra work. She was not immediately aware of institutional supports, but felt her faculty members were supportive of those who were working full-time.

Renee's most positive experience was the intellectual challenge of the courses. She enjoyed wrestling with theories and ideas that were presented. Her proudest moment was earning the highest grade in her qualitative research course, and she was unable to think of any negative moments in her program. However, Renee began to have many other responsibilities at work. These additional responsibilities, coupled with changes to tuition assistance, led Renee to decide the cost/benefit of finishing the degree was not worth it to her. Additionally, she found herself increasingly disenfranchised with higher education, as well as worried about age discrimination post-completion.

When I asked Renee about others who had left or completed, she shared that she knew others who had not completed yet, but she would not characterize them as having left their program. She said many were still working on their dissertations, but would need to get reinstated to finish the degree. For those who completed the degree, she felt they had very strong dissertation advisors who pushed them to complete.

Scott

Scott has worked in residence life for almost 20 years. After his undergraduate degree, he went to the southeast United States to pursue a master's degree, and then worked professionally in residence life. He decided to pursue the terminal degree five years after his master's degree because he was looking to move up in residence life and he was not having much success. His mentors had told him four to six years post-master's was an ideal time to pursue the doctorate, and five years was right in that timeline. He joked that he had heard "When you have your Ph.D., it's like having your pants on – nobody notices. But in higher ed, when you don't have your Ph.D., it's like not having your pants on – people notice, and it can stop you from moving up." He was primarily interested in remaining in student affairs administration, but wanted the opportunity to pursue faculty careers as well.

When Scott was looking for doctoral programs, he chose his program because he had completed his master's degree there, and would be reapplying, and therefore would not need to take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) again. He was familiar and comfortable with the faculty in the program as well. He planned to attend full-time and quickly procured an assistantship in housing. However, shortly before the start of the semester, there was an emergency full-time vacancy, and the department asked Scott to

consider the position. He decided to take the position and work full-time, while enrolling in two courses each semester. His courses primarily took place in the late afternoon or evening, so he would spend most of his day in his professional role and then switch to student mode a few times a week before class.

Scott also decided to take some of the advice that he had been giving to students to heart. He was determined not to procrastinate, so made an effort to turn in papers as early as possible, working on research assignments as soon as he saw the syllabus. Scott was not immediately aware of institutional supports, but felt his professional department was very supportive of his degree pursuits.

Scott's most positive and proud experience was that he did very well academically. He also mentioned a feedback opportunity from one of his professors. The professor had asked students for their perspective on how theory was used in higher education, and Scott's response was honest and to-the-point. He shared people were not excited in his work to talk about student development theory, and Scott's professor appreciated the honesty and reminder. Scott did not feel he had any specific negative experiences. However, he shared he was unsure about support moving forward. There were a lot of unknowns in his program with faculty retirements and transitions, and most of the faculty were leaving the program.

Scott shared that everyone else in his cohort did finish the degree. He felt those colleagues were academically driven, with a goal in mind, and he did not feel the same drive. However, for Scott, his decision to leave was partially due to family unhappiness, and partially due to a lack of opportunity to move up in his professional life. He admitted leaving his program was a challenging decision, leading to some job insecurity

immediately after he departed. However, he felt like he made the right decision for his family at that time. He does consider going back to complete his degree at another institution, but is not sure he has the time with his full time position as well as his family responsibilities as a parent and spouse.

Skyler

Skyler had a non-traditional path to higher education and to the field of student affairs. Skyler worked in a health care field for a few years after completing high school. After becoming a parent and learning the father of her child was terminally ill, Skyler decided to pursue an undergraduate degree. She completed her undergraduate degree, and decided to pursue a master's degree before applying to professional schools. She worked as a graduate assistant in residence life, and fell in love with the field; she has worked professionally in residence life since then.

Skyler decided to pursue a doctorate because she felt she had strong skills in working with students in crisis, and a long-term interest in working as a Dean of Students. She chose her program primarily because of geographic location. She also considered the prestige of the programs she was considering, and ultimately decided to pursue her degree at the institution at which she was employed, since she thought she would stay there indefinitely. Though she did not receive tuition remission, she felt it would be simplest to keep her academics and professional life at the same institution.

When Skyler began her doctoral program, she had to be very disciplined. This was no different than her previous educational experiences as a parent and spouse. She worked full-time, and took classes one to two days a week. She made a concerted effort to come in to the office early and leave by 5pm so that she had time with her family

during the week. After that time with her family, she spent five to seven hours each night studying and trying to stay ahead on all of her work. The weekends were often split, one day to family, and the other day to academics. She often found herself weighing any additional opportunities with the amount of time they would take and the academic progress she was making. Skyler mentioned her institution had writing workshops and a variety of other support systems for students. However, she did not feel she needed these supports.

Skyler's most positive experience was her education law class. She loved working with the faculty for that course, and appreciated the structure and content of the course; she earned a perfect grade in the class. She also really enjoyed her cohort experience. Her proudest moment was when she walked out of her first comprehensive exam. She knew she had done well on the exam, and the emotions of being a high school student sent down a vocational track instead of towards college, and then finally getting to a doctorate program were pretty overwhelming for Skyler.

Skyler's negative experiences mostly related to program frustrations, and in particular, a series of events in her personal life that affected her academic progress. One of her parents became ill and needed to move in with Skyler. During the same time, Skyler was at a pivotal moment in her doctoral journey, about to take her second comprehensive exam. At the same time, Skyler was managing challenging work situations requiring her to move to a different location, as well as the dissolution of her marriage. These factors all combined triggered the beginning of Skyler's decision to leave her program.

When I asked Skyler about others who had left their programs, she talked about a colleague who was not a native English speaker; the rigor and intensity of the program were too much for her. The only other person she knew who had left the program had left due to significant health issues. For the colleagues who finished the degree, she just felt like the terminal degree was simply doable if you were focused and doing the work. She admitted she probably could have managed to complete the degree if one or two of the major life events had happened…but not all three at the same time.

After Skyler chose to leave her program, she said there were too many other things going on at the same time for her to put too much effort into caring about her departure. She has since transitioned to a new job at a different institution. She was very frustrated and upset with her doctoral institution and has no desire to return to that degree program, especially because the advisor she had challenges with was still at the institution. She may pursue a degree in the future at a different institution.

Trish

Trish found a job working in housing after her first year of undergraduate studies, and has worked in some capacity in residence life since that point. She went straight from her undergraduate degree to a master's degree, and pursued residence life professionally after that point. After about ten years as a professional, Trish was looking for opportunities to move up in housing, but was not finding much that fit for her. She decided to consider Ph.D. programs as an option, while simultaneously searching for a professional position. She took the GRE, and judiciously considered programs, knowing she wanted to ensure she found the right fit if she did pursue the degree. She chose the program she ultimately enrolled in because she had family and friends in the area. She

knew she was not interested in becoming faculty, but thought the terminal degree may help her as a practitioner.

Trish attended her program full-time and had a research assistantship while enrolled, working for a student affairs office on campus. She often found herself researching what other institutions were doing to deal with particular issues on their campus. Courses were a mix of day and night options; the program had recently started adding night classes to provide more flexibility for students. Trish would work about five hours a day in her research assistantship, and then spend time preparing for and in her classes. She also placed a high priority on spending time with colleagues in her cohort, saying that most nights after class, she would head out to a bar for a drink after class to decompress with her classmates. She also spent a lot of time during the weekends working on her coursework and research. Trish placed a high priority on remaining involved with her professional organizations, so she also tried to make sure she was able to make it to conferences and stay as involved as her schedule would allow.

In terms of provided supports, Trish felt there was not much organization of the supports that existed. She had to choose her own advisor, which felt like a weird process to her. She admitted feeling lost and unsure of how to proceed and she considered what she needed in an advisor. The cohort ultimately became one of her strongest support systems, as well as a student organization she was a part of. She also took advantage of institution-provided mental health counseling.

Trish's most positive experience in her program was her cohort. She is still in contact with her colleagues and credits them with supporting her through hard days of coursework and papers. She also enjoyed her research assistantship, blending what she

learned in the classroom with real administrative work in student affairs. Her proudest moment was earning A's in both of her statistics courses. She felt like she really understood the research methodologies and could apply them in a potential dissertation. However, Trish's most negative moments related to struggles with her academic program as she dealt with a mental health diagnosis and physical injuries. Her program placed her on academic probation due to incomplete coursework, and questioned her desire to complete the degree.

When I asked Trish about others who had left or completed, she shared a story about a close friend who had also left her program. According to her, he had been dealing with his own mental health struggles and also did not feel supported by the program. According to Trish, her friend and her both struggled with a perceived faculty attitude that the faculty would get involved in challenges with the master's students because they were younger and needed more help, but not with the doctoral students, because they were perceived to be adults with no need for guidance or support. Trish felt like her colleagues who finished the degree were determined to do so. They also often had stronger supports and different relationships with the faculty in the program. "Even though it's a very self-driven process, you need somebody out there also pushing you along as well," she said.

Though Trish is frustrated with how her departure came about, she also felt like leaving was the right decision. She has done a fair amount of self-research to learn about other people who have not completed the degree that has helped her to reframe her frustrations and recognize that she does not need to feel bad or guilty that she did not finish; finishing the degree simply was not the right decision for her at that time.

Xavier

Xavier found out about higher education as an undergraduate student when he found himself lost in terms of career choice. Xavier was somewhat involved as an undergraduate student and enjoyed his experience, so decided to pursue a master's degree in higher education. He has worked in student conduct as a professional since that point. He decided to pursue a doctorate because he found himself intrigued by his colleagues, saying, "it's a different language they [his colleagues] speak." His only reason for pursuing the degree, however, was for professional mobility; he knew he would advance more, and more quickly, with the terminal degree.

Xavier chose his doctoral program because he received tuition benefits that could be used at the institution at which he was employed. It was also one of the few Ph.D. programs in the geographic area. He was single at the time and felt like he had the time and ability to complete the degree. His program required residency, so he needed to manage a year of full-time work and full-time classes simultaneously. Xavier said his first priority after his job was to complete his academic work; he actually stopped many of the other activities he was involved in to make the time available.

Xavier felt like any available supports from the institution or department needed to be requested. "It was probably there if you needed it, but you needed to know who to ask and how to ask for it," he said. There was a sense that students needed to figure out their own direction and get their "stuff" together before approaching faculty for assistance. He did mention he relied on his community of students, but said the cohort worked together to support one another; it was not directed by faculty at any point.

Xavier's most positive moments in his doctoral program came through personal empowerment. He finished all of the coursework required for his terminal degree, and felt personally fulfilled by this. He also valued the presentations and research he was able to participate in. His proudest moment was passing his comprehensive exams. He felt like passing those exams was a very important hurdle in his journey – "it could stop right there. All that work that I had done up until that point could have been meaningless," he said. However, Xavier's most negative moment was his dissertation. He did not realize he could change advisors. He found himself completing multiple literature reviews and then hearing nothing from his advisor for a semester, then feeling like his advisor had changed his topic without consent. He felt used and belittled, like his advisor simply did not care if he finished the degree.

When I asked Xavier about others who left or completed, he shared everyone in the program when he started that did finish took over a decade to complete the degree, and most did not complete the degree. Many had challenges with their advisors, and others had family issues or work-related responsibilities that caused their departure. For those who finished the degree, Xavier said they were "rockstars." They simply put up with the "nonsense" and persevered to completion. They also were willing to advisor-hop, or move to a different advisor if they could not work with their current advisor. He also said many that finished had the help of a research team in the department.

Xavier was very bitter about his departure from his doctoral program. He strongly felt the program was not designed for student success, and that faculty were simply there to earn a paycheck, not to produce scholarly researchers and practitioners. He feels he has been significantly impacted with regard to job mobility since he does not

have the terminal degree credential, even though he has significant experience in his field.

These participant stories showcase the broad perspectives of those who choose to pursue their doctoral degree, their motivations, their experiences, and their ultimate decision to leave their programs without completing the terminal degree. They spanned functional areas, age, and geographic location, as well as program type and intentions upon graduating.

Patterns and Reactions

Various patterns emerged throughout the narratives of these participants that are important to note here. For example, 14 of the 15 participants specifically cited career progression as a key reason for pursuing the doctoral degree; the only one who did not pursue the degree primarily for career progression was Renee. Of note, Renee was one of the older participants. Another pattern that emerged was that of academic struggle. This manifested in incomplete courses, poor academic performance, and failed comprehensive or preliminary exams. Five participants discussed academic struggles as a factor in their decision to leave. Four participants found the field of higher education through what they perceived to be non-traditional paths, and for three of these participants, the desire to pursue the doctoral degree was also related to their lack of academic background in the field. Finally, four participants attending part-time discussed the perception full-time students somehow navigated through the programs more easily, had access to more resources, and were able to finish their degrees with significant support from faculty.

About halfway through my doctoral program, I found myself floundering. I had completed almost all the coursework required for my degree, finding courses that worked

with my full-time job. I did not quite know the topic on which I wanted to do my dissertation, though it seemed like everyone around me had been working on theirs since the day they started the program. I was also starting to question my initial desire to become a faculty member in a higher education graduate preparation program. While I felt like there were interesting questions to explore, I was not sure the rigmarole of faculty life was something to which I aspired any longer. If not faculty life, what would I do with my degree? It was at this point that I began to consider leaving my program. Each time I considered leaving, though, something would always draw me back – likely what started my dive into the topic of doctoral attrition. I would wonder: Why did other people leave their programs without completing the degree?

While interviewing my participants, I found myself reaching emotional extremes: anger at what seemed to be an egregious mistreatment of a student; excitement at another participant's news of pregnancy; sadness when hearing of aging parents who passed away. I found my participants had a variety of experiences leading them to leave their programs. Some felt forced, while others felt like they made a conscious decision to leave. Often, participants described a combination of external factors and internal factors that ultimately culminated in their decision to depart. I found myself hearing a lot of my own struggles in their reactions. Beverly's initial drive to complete the degree to become a faculty member resonated with my own story, and I felt myself nodding right along as she discussed the lack of desire to do work once she started realizing faculty life was not for her. Amy's challenges in completing work when housework needed to be done echoed my own. In writing this dissertation, I, like many others, found my home to be cleaner than ever on the days when I just had no desire to write.

However, I simply could not bring myself to walk away. Perhaps this was because my mother was always so proud of my education, and I could not bring myself to let her down, especially after she passed away shortly after I passed my second written comprehensive examination. This was different than some of my participants who experienced loss during their degree pursuits. While others might say I struggled academically, given a poor grade in a course and a failed attempt at comprehensive examinations, I would characterize these challenges differently.

Though the experiences of my participants were individual, there were common themes that emerged when considering why participants left their doctoral programs without completing the degree. Those themes included (1) inflexibility of the degree, (2) incongruence between program and participant goals, (3) lack of advising and mentoring, and (4) personal factors.

While previous research did explore reasons for departure (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Ferrer De Valero, 2001; Girves & Wemmurus, 1988; Golde, 2000; Green, 1997; Lovitts, 2001), the experiences of those who have chosen to leave doctoral programs in higher education and student affairs was not well explored. The inherent differences of an interdisciplinary field, with a student population that differs significantly from the overall doctoral population, merited a fresh look at the reasons people did not complete the terminal degree. Through understanding the previous research and adding to the literature, I hoped to provide enlightenment to faculty, practitioners, and students alike.

Inflexibility of the Degree

For many participants, the program and/or institution seemed inflexible, and not able to support students through obstacles that arose as they progressed through the

degree. These obstacles came in a variety of forms but participants primarily focused on time limits, lack of support for part-time students, significant family concerns that impeded progress or necessitated a different path, mental and physical health concerns, and programmatic challenges. Though initially lack of support for part-time students and mental and physical health concerns may seem less obviously connected to inflexibility, participants felt their experiences with not being able to find accessible support as a part-time student, or challenges managing mental and physical health often led to problems being able to meet requirements throughout the degree. For example, Mark's experience in not being able to access dissertation writing workshops as a part-time student meant he did not have needed support to help him work through these challenges, which in part led to Mark running into challenges with institutional time limits. Almost half of the participants expressed frustration with rigid deadlines, policies and procedures, including a lack of support for part-time students, health and family, and time limits.

Support for Part-Time Students

Eleven of the fifteen participants attended their program as part-time students who were also working full-time jobs. In each case, participants felt there were minimal supports for students who were not attending the institution full-time. Many cited the lack of accessibility to a variety of supports, including university-level dissertation workshops, faculty time, and socialization experiences within the department.

Amy perceived that her program was designed for those who intended to be researchers and the supports that did exist seemed to be set up for full-time students in the program. For example, the program had a cohort model, but it was only for students attending full-time. "If the program would be set up to be more supportive of working

professionals…I might have successfully completed it," she said. She did not elaborate on what she would have considered supportive. In addition, Amy believed the students she knew who completed the degree were in full-time programs that were designed to support their doctoral work. Those completers had teaching and research assistantships that allowed them to pursue doctoral study as a full-time job. Amy also felt like her colleagues who worked full-time while attending the program were more willing to sacrifice in other areas of their lives than she was. Amy recognized the choice she had made, and the fact she was not willing to sacrifice her time and energy any more than she already was helped her decide to leave the program.

Even participants enrolled at institutions where they were employed as full-time employees struggled to find resources. "If they provided things, we had to ask for it…I found over the years in working there, it was probably there if you needed it, but you needed to know who to ask and how to ask for it," said Xavier. This frustrated Xavier, because he often felt there was an expectation students were aware of all of the possible supports that could be provided; and in the words of Former United States Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (2002), "There are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know." Though Former Secretary Rumsfeld's comment was in relation to another event, the concepts behind his words also apply here. Mark also believed there was not much support for students who were attending part-time, regardless of whether it was the intent of his program. "The supports that were provided…I always got the impression that those were for full-time students," he said. He would ask about the statistics lab, study groups, dissertation workshops, and would often find these events taking place in the middle of the day. "We full-time working people would have to take

off," he said. "Those things are during the day, if you're going to go, you have to take off of work." Mark was frustrated, as he was often unable to negotiate around primary responsibilities in his full-time position.

Some participants reported some sort of full-time residency requirement within their programs. Many programs only required a short period of full-time enrollment, so this was a transitional status for most. Xavier felt his required year of residency was "brutal," citing his need to stop other activities in which he was interested, including coaching and community involvement, in order to make time to complete his coursework and program requirements. "I completely understand why people quit their jobs to be able to do it," he said, though he was not in a place where he felt comfortable quitting his own job to attend full-time. Even though Xavier was only required to complete a year of residency, he felt his time was limited throughout his program, since he was not able to return to the other activities he stopped for his year of residency.

However, about half of the participants felt their programs were supportive of those who attended part-time, demonstrating that flexibility is a possibility in higher education and student affairs doctoral programs. "The faculty members were very cognizant of the fact that many of us had full-time jobs, and school was part-time," Phoebe said. Bailey also chose her low-residency, online program for the flexibility it provided her, both in location and in time committed to the brick-and-mortar classroom. Jackie appreciated her program's flexibility in how she was able to schedule her coursework. For her, spring and summer were her busiest times at work, so she would take a heavier course load in the fall to compensate. Carol also had chosen a program

with weekend courses and found that structure beneficial to her ability to balance a full-time job with her schoolwork.

Health and Family

When Bailey was pregnant with her child, she took two semesters away from her program in order to manage her newborn's medical problems. She did not indicate that it was any sort of formalized leave of absence. Her daughter needed over a dozen surgeries to manage her condition, and Bailey felt her priority was to take care of her baby. When she returned two semesters later, she felt she still was not making progress toward her degree. The following semester, Bailey's advisor reported to her that the university wanted her to take additional classes and complete the comprehensive examinations because of her time away from the program.

One participant, Trish, was faced with managing her own health crises in the midst of her doctoral experience. Trish suffered an injury in her second year of her program that began to impact her ability to succeed. After surgery, Trish was unable to walk for two months, and found herself physically exhausted from the exertion of moving from place to place throughout the day. In hindsight, Trish felt like she should have taken a medical leave of absence, but she was unaware that was an option since no one in her program mentioned it as a possibility. In addition, Trish struggled with mental health, was diagnosed with depression during her doctoral program, and began taking an anti-depressant. The combination of these factors made it difficult for Trish to keep up with reading and assignments.

> I think that's where I really started to feel like the department wasn't as supportive. I was talking about struggling, and I ended up taking incompletes in everything…I don't really know where it all felt like it all started to fall apart…I

> was retaking courses, but felt the department was not behind me as much. Couldn't figure out why I was getting mixed messages.

Shortly after the end of that semester, Trish's advisor met with her and explained the faculty in the department felt Trish did not want to be in the program any longer. Faculty members cited instances in which Trish expressed thoughts questioning whether the program was still the best fit. This frustrated Trish as she felt like she had clearly displayed her desire to keep pursuing the degree through her involvement in a student group, coming to classes, and being easily available. Though she admits she had questioned whether the doctoral program was still a good fit, she explained that those questions were connected to her mental health and depression. Trish was placed on academic probation due to her incomplete grades. "It felt like I wasn't getting better fast enough for them," she said. Soon after, Trish moved out of the area because she lost her graduate assistantship. She received a letter from the department notifying her that if she did not want to continue in the program, the program could dismiss her. Trish felt threatened, so she did not respond. "I felt like if I tried, I would be fighting with them for the next however many years to get through the rest of this process. And, is it worth fighting for?" she questioned.

Time Limits

Three participants, Carol, Xavier, and Mark, mentioned time limits as a direct factor in their departure; all were attending their programs as part-time students. These participants also indicated various life experiences that challenged their progress as they moved along, such as mental health or parental illness. Carol's mother passed away close to the expiration of her program, so she negotiated with her department for a six-month

extension. However, her poor mental health after the passing of her mother caused her to be unable to complete the requirements in the agreed-upon timeline.

Xavier also attempted to negotiate with the department for an extension. The department agreed, as long as he worked out a timeline with his advisor. He did so, and then his advisor did not respond in a timely manner to the agreed-upon timeline. When he brought up his concerns to his department, the response was that if he was not able to abide by the deadline, he could choose to resign or be forced out. Xavier chose to leave.

Mark had taken a couple of courses as a non-degree seeking student. These courses were included in his time to degree clock, and courses were beginning to expire, meaning he would need to take additional courses to meet credit requirements for the degree. By that point, Mark had moved away and online courses were not an option. When Mark was unable to reach anyone to discuss options, he felt, "if these people aren't willing to return calls or emails or messages, they're not willing to do this petition work."

Given the challenges faced by some of the participants, in addition to other responsibilities in their professional lives, it was not a surprise that three participants mentioned they would not finish within the time limit set by their program or institution. Each expressed their interest in completing the degree but an inability to do so. All three of these participants were in the dissertation stage of the degree when their program expired, having made significant progress through a variety of obstacles. From the perspective of a faculty member, however, many of the life things that came up were signs to the faculty that the degree may not have been the right fit at the time the students were enrolled. In addition, faculty may not have been consulted when the various challenges came up; they may have been able to provide or refer to assistance. More than

one participant noted they were unaware of supports that were offered by their department or institution; it is highly unlikely there were absolutely no supports available. However, many institutional supports seem to be primarily designed for undergraduate students. Another factor that may have complicated seeking out institutional support may have been that many of these participants attended programs at the institution at which they worked. They may have had professional relationships with colleagues that made seeking assistance awkward or a conflict of interest.

Programmatic Challenges

Many participants expressed the impact of programmatic challenges on their decision to depart. Some of these programmatic challenges were related to lack of policies to address issues, while other programmatic challenges focused on the impact of cohort experiences, challenges with the academic instruction, or expectations of the program that were not met. For example, cohort challenges often related to the difficulties involved in having a large cohort with many people vying for the limited time and attention of faculty.

While Carol enjoyed having what she referred to as a large cohort, with a lot of people with which to connect, it became a frustration for her when trying to set up her committee.

> But when it comes down to getting your committee, you start scheming and planning against [the other students], because you need to get a committee. So you're trying to figure out how to get ahead of them, because there's only so many faculty members, and the ones who legitimately will respond to your emails, give you time and energy, and are committed to your research, that's hard to find.

Xavier's program had a research team that helped people complete "real life research", which he found exciting. Xavier initially saw the research as a positive

concept, but later realized the program did not help everyone similarly. He saw other students start on the team, and then after a couple of years, those students would have their own projects selected by the faculty member in charge, and then they would go through the team. They would receive help on a variety of aspects, such as Institutional Review Board applications, data coding, and analysis. Xavier's projects were never selected by the faculty lead, and he was never able to get help from this research team on his own progress, which frustrated him. "I just helped a whole bunch of other people get through [their Ph.D.] and got scammed in the process," said Xavier.

Beverly's felt like the instruction that she received within her program was sub-par. When she met with other students in the program before committing to her institution, she was told not to expect good teaching. She felt poor instruction was something she could overcome, and that the doctoral journey was more focused on individual work. However, she found herself miserable in her higher education courses. "They were poorly taught, they were poorly organized, they were not well sequenced," she said. Beverly also expressed dismay that a faculty member was clearly on Facebook while Beverly was giving an in-class presentation. Beverly made an effort to take classes outside of the program and found those classes were "amazing."

Frustration was a common feeling. Skyler was frustrated with ethics in her program, and said, "After I started the program, the program came under extreme critical criticism. It had done some things that were really wrong, and their ranking plummeted."

Francine's professional experience impacted the way she viewed her graduate student experience. In the department where she worked, students chose to attend the university based on the relationship with a specific faculty member and what they were

researching. If that faculty member moved, the students often went with the research lab. If the faculty member changed research topics, students had to decide whether it was more important to continue with that faculty member and change their research interests, whether they should attempt to find another lab with which to work, or whether to investigate other options such as departing from the program. Francine specifically applied to her program because there was a faculty member working in an area she wanted to study. When the person Francine was hoping to work with significantly changed his research to align with a new grant, Francine did not want to work with the new line of inquiry, and felt like she did not have other options.

One of the most negative experiences for Becky regarded a major issue with her advisor. Becky was making continual progress on her dissertation and regularly sent along drafts to her advisor for feedback. She noticed it took longer and longer to receive feedback, which she believed affected her forward momentum. Finally, she sent along what she believed would be a final draft of her first two chapters of her dissertation, and then radio silence; Becky heard nothing back from her advisor. She emailed her advisor and did not receive any response. She then called the institution a few times trying to track down her advisor. Administrative staff told Becky they would pass along the message, or they would transfer her to her advisor's voice mail.

About four months went by, and Becky still had not heard anything from her advisor or her program. One day, Becky settled in to read an article in a professional journal. She was excited to read the article since her advisor had written it. As she began to read the article, she took a look at the footnote at the bottom of the page; Becky's advisor was at a different institution. Becky was stunned.

> She was no longer at the institution…. Nobody had told me. She had not told me she was leaving, nobody had emailed me to follow up with me on who my new advisor would be.

Becky decided she needed to visit the institution even though she was attending a satellite campus. She drove to the main campus location, about four hours away, to meet with the head of the department. She expressed her frustration and disappointment regarding the situation, and the lack of communication from the department regarding her advisor's departure. The department chair simply responded that it was Becky's responsibility to meet with every professor she had classes with and see if they would be willing to take her on as an advisee. It had been almost two years since Becky had completed coursework, and many of the faculty had moved on to different institutions at that point. In addition, there were a few faculty she was not willing to work with because she said they were "idiots." All of the faculty members with whom Becky spoke said that they did not have the time to take on another advisee, so Becky went back to the department chair and explained her situation. The department chair responded that he would get back to her on that. Becky never heard back.

Becky felt like she had been persistent in trying to contact her advisor, but was very disappointed by the program's lack of communication regarding her advisor's departure. She felt the advisor should have directly communicated with her to let her know she would be leaving, and the department should have provided resources so that Becky knew what her options were to remain in the program. In addition, Becky believed that when she called the university, she should have been told at that point in time that her advisor no longer worked for the institution, not that someone would pass her message along. Clearly, the program needed to have a plan in place to communicate

a faculty member's departure to students, as well as how to replace the departed faculty member.

Xavier's experience on the research team led him to believe he would have the opportunity to have the team help him with his dissertation. Francine's experience with the graduate program she ran impacted what she expected to experience in her own program. Given their experiences, it was not a surprise they were frustrated when what they expected did not come to fruition. Clear and consistent expectations shape retention efforts, so when these participants did not feel they understood the expectations from the program, it certainly follows that they would consider departing from their programs.

Faculty in these programs may have also expected students to be far more proactive in understanding the culture and dynamics of the program in which they were enrolled. The faculty likely worked within programs designed to meet specific learning objectives – and these objectives may not align with what students felt they needed. The onus is not only on the faculty to design programs; it is also on the student to investigate the product (for lack of a better term) in which they are investing.

Incongruence Between Program and Participant Goals

Many participants expressed incongruence between their personal or professional goals and the perceived or realized goals of their academic programs. While participants theoretically could have chosen any institution to complete their doctoral work, many specifically chose programs at their own institution, programs that were geographically close, or programs where they would receive some sort of financial benefit for attending. All of the participants considered a variety of factors when choosing their doctoral programs, and consideration of program goals, such as preparing the next generation of

faculty, was simply not one of the criteria most mentioned. For example, twelve participants were interested in remaining in student affairs administration after completing the degree, while two participants were open to administrative or faculty positions in academia. However, only three participants specifically mentioned program goals (to prepare practitioners or to prepare faculty) in their decision to attend. Only one participant, Beverly, was primarily interested in becoming a faculty member after graduation. Renee and Becky both mentioned personal fulfillment and intellectual stimulation as contributing factors to their interest in pursuing the terminal degree.

Eleven of the fifteen participants specifically decided to pursue the doctoral degree in order to progress in administration, aspiring to positions such as vice president, dean, or director of a unit. Bailey said, "I really just did it because I wanted a better job…I started because I didn't think I could be a senior student affairs administrator without it." Phoebe admitted part of her desire to pursue the degree was because she was "enamored of the title Doctor," but also said she was interested in continuing her career and becoming a dean of students or vice president.

Misalignment of Program and Participant Goals

For many participants, their program selection did not involve significant investigation into the goals of the academic program in which they chose to enroll. Because other factors played into their program choice, participants often had not considered their own professional goals and how the program they selected would align with the outcomes they were seeking. As participants embarked on their academic journey, a few realized their programs were not designed to reach the goals they found

important. This misalignment of participant and program goals led some to decide to depart from their program.

Participants did not mention program focus, faculty research areas, or other similar criteria as factors in their search. In fact, only four participants, Beverly, Trish, Scott, and Ignatius, moved in order to begin doctoral coursework, and each of these participants were planning to attend full-time when they were admitted to their programs. Skyler considered the desire to pursue a doctoral degree in the job search that brought her out west, but she moved for a position prior to applying for the doctoral program. Ignatius and Beverly searched broadly, while Scott chose his program because he had completed his master's degree at the institution and would not need to take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). The location of family played significantly into Trish's decision. Seven participants (Francine, Carol, Xavier, Phoebe, Bailey, Renee, and Jackie) cited a significant discount or full tuition waiver as integral in their choice of program. Jackie's choice of program was also functional; she chose a program nearby to minimize the impact of commute time, as well as an interest in working at the institution in the future.

In addition, three of the participants, Francine, Renee, and Becky, chose to pursue the doctoral degree because their masters and undergraduate degrees were in other disciplines. They felt competent in their work, but mentioned that they felt the lack of a degree in higher education affected their candidacy for jobs in the field. All three women indicated that they decided to pursue the Ph.D. initially because they felt the terminal degree would be a better financial choice compared to another master's degree.

Part of the reason Trish chose her program was because of her perception that the program balanced the needs of those intending to pursue faculty careers with those intending to continue in administration. She was primarily interested in remaining in student affairs administration, but open to the possibility of becoming a faculty member. However, Trish later said she felt misled by her program. The official title of her program was Higher Education Administration, yet Trish said,

> It was kind of misleading because I had one departmental class on administration. One. And it was meant to serve as the only one. When we asked for budget classes, or some other things, we were told, 'We don't have the interest,' or 'We don't have the time.' We could seek them out elsewhere. The administration class covered leadership concepts, but if we wanted more leadership, we had to take [those courses] in other departments.

Since Trish's primary focus was progression in student affairs administration, she felt those courses should have been part of a curriculum with Administration in the name.

Francine's experience also ended because her goals did not align with her program. Francine worked as a graduate program director in another department on campus, and found herself comparing her experience in her professional department to her academic department. Additionally, after Francine's advisor left the program, she felt like she no longer had an end goal. She did not feel like she had a research area and did not feel she had the skills to figure out what to study next. "There is no more end goal," she said. "You don't get a Ph.D. in nothing."

Goal Shift During Program

Another cause of doctoral attrition is changing goals (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Golde, 1998; Hoskins & Goldberg, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). Though participants began the degree fully expecting to complete it, many found new areas of interest or shifts in their life perspectives about what was most important to them. Near the end of her time in the

program, Phoebe was exploring her options, and someone asked if she wanted her degree, and asked how it would make a difference in Phoebe's life. When prompted with such a question, she responded,

> I don't know that it's going to make a big difference in my life. I do not think that I even want to aspire to any kind of elevated position. That kind of freed me up when I realized, "Do I need to do this? And am I doing it just to be called Doctor?" And I thought, "I don't need that."

Beverly realized quickly that her program was not working out for her. She did not like her coursework, she did not enjoy the instruction she was receiving, and she did not think she had the self-discipline to complete comprehensive exams and her dissertation. She was no longer interested in finishing the degree, and knew she would rather leave of her own volition than be asked to leave the program. However, as an international student, she also recognized that her status in the country could be negatively impacted by her departure from the program.

> Right away, I was like this is not working out for various reasons. It's just not what I thought it was going to be. It took about a semester to realize that. Then pretty quickly I was like 'I have to figure out what to do here. But again, with that international issue, I couldn't just quit.

Beverly ended up transitioning to the master's degree within the program, which allowed her to remain in the United States and provided her more time to navigate her unique circumstances.

Ignatius, Amy, and Jackie all saw their life goals shift during the doctoral program. Amy found her frustrations regarding her work and self-discipline growing throughout program, and was then offered an opportunity to take a job across the country. She had struggled to complete coursework, readings, and research, and was losing motivation to move forward. "I've always said it was the job, but I was getting pretty burned out even before my job changed," she said. Ignatius decided to purchase a house,

had a second child, and her family needed more of her time, which slowly pushed the doctoral program down on her priority list. Jackie gave birth and was trying to figure out how to manage a newborn, classes, and a husband who worked full-time. Wanting to spend time with her newborn son led her to decide to take some time off, and then time off with her newborn son turned into "he just turned nine." Their goals had shifted from being an academic or climbing a career ladder to a desire to focus on being parents.

Renee and Ignatius also found themselves increasingly disenfranchised with higher education. Renee joined the program feeling slightly disillusioned at her perception that higher education focused too much on a business model, looking at students as monetary value rather than growth opportunities. When she started, she felt like she would still be able to make changes, but progressively grew more frustrated with the systems in place. Further, as an older woman, Renee was concerned about age discrimination – she did not feel she would be a desirable candidate for faculty positions after completing her doctorate. Ignatius felt that the disconnect between the practitioner experience and the academic experience was heightened when she went to complete her comprehensive exams. She felt like the program preached "meeting students where they are [sic]," but that her comprehensive experience did not attempt to meet her where her needs were, as someone planning to continue as a practitioner rather than a researcher. After failing her first attempt at comprehensive exams, she felt like she was being hazed, like comprehensive exams were designed for students to simply isolate for a week and write rather than engage in a discussion of the concepts and the program was no longer helping her meet her goals of moving up in administration. She said, "If I'm going to sacrifice my family, I'm going to sacrifice it for something worthy of my while."

Mark chose to pursue the terminal degree to become the director of a unit. At the time when he entered the program, there was a trend in career services for directors to have doctorates. However, as Mark progressed through the degree, he saw a shift through the economic crash of 2008, where many more career services directors were coming directly from the business world. They were looking for "who can get in here and produce results," as Mark said.

Even though Beverly was originally interested in becoming a faculty member when she started the program, she eventually began to see some of the negative aspects of faculty life.

> You could work so hard, finish your Ph.D., work so hard at being a faculty member, and then not get tenure. And that's just not in your control. You can obviously do things to make it more likely, but ultimately, it's not your decision whether you get tenure or not.

Beverly recognized the research, reading, analysis, and writing she did as a doctoral student was the reality of faculty life after completing the degree. "I was not excited about it as a doctoral student, it was not going to happen for the rest of my life," she said. Even though she had put a significant amount of preparation into finding her program, the reality of doctoral study at her institution was different than she had anticipated.

Renee also changed goals throughout her time in the program. When she began the program, it was purely out of a desire for intellectual stimulation. Near the time she left the program, Renee expressed some interest in an academic position, but felt her age would be a significantly negative factor in those hiring processes. Coupled with the other demands on her time, she determined that spending time with her family and friends was more important to her at that point in her life.

The conflict between program and participant goals was important for a number of reasons. Almost all of the participants were hoping to remain in student affairs administration after completing the terminal degree. However, when many of the participants were considering pursuing a doctoral education, their program choices were limited, and they did not necessarily have the luxury of available programs that focused on administrative careers.

Participants were almost exclusively interested in remaining in student affairs administration, yet most mentioned their programs intended to prepare them for faculty roles. Factors in program choice meant there was often a disconnect between what the participants were hoping to get out of their education and what the doctoral programs to which they applied offered in reality. For example, Mark and Amy were enrolled part-time in programs known for producing faculty; however, they felt that their experiences as part-time students were not comparable to their classmates'. They were not interested in becoming faculty members and felt their programs focused too much on the full-time students that intended to find tenure-track positions. Neither had a desire to become faculty upon completion of the degree; they had chosen the programs based on geographic location. In addition, even though some participants did consider program goals in their program choice, they felt the reality of the programs was not the same as what they had been told through their application processes.

Additionally, half of the participants shifted their own life goals during their pursuit of the terminal degree. Others often perceived these goal shifts as negative, since they impacted interest in pursuing the degree. However, most of these participants just felt the pursuit of the degree was no longer in line with what they hoped to accomplish,

and they did not see a reason to finish the degree simply because they had started it. From the perspective of a faculty member, however, they may have seen a student who did not take time to seriously consider what it meant to pursue a terminal degree. A faculty member may have seen an employee simply hoping to use tuition benefits for professional development; perhaps the student had no interest in completing the degree from the start, but needed to be admitted due to institution rules.

Lack of Advising and Mentoring

Many participants struggled with a perceived lack of advising and mentoring. Some participants seemed to want an advisor to provide them with significant direction and feedback. However, other participants seemed to ache for a mentor, someone who understood how to motivate the participant, taking into account their various personal needs, circumstances, and passions. For some, the lack of advising was exhibited in the form of communication issues that led to their decision to depart. These issues ranged from a lack of communication and lack of transparency in program structure or expectations to failure to provide feedback and challenges in communicating and relationship building once a participant needed (or chose) to move away from the institution. The lack of mentoring often played out when a participant did not feel there was support for their completion. Participants were also affected by negative relationships with others in their department, and occasionally outside their department, depending on their committee makeup. The importance of the advisor/advisee relationship was paramount to the decision to depart for most participants, and the impact of the doctoral committee also had an impact on their choice.

Failure to Provide Adequate Feedback

Multiple participants (Bailey, Becky, Carol, Mark, and Trish) expressed frustration with the delay in receiving feedback from submitted work. For many participants, frustration was coupled with the financial costs associated with being enrolled for credits while not being able to progress due to the lack of timely feedback. For example, all mentioned perceived delays in receiving feedback on dissertation chapters. Often, participants were not sure what they should be doing, if anything, in the interim.

Bailey would submit a draft for review, and then not hear anything in return for eight or nine weeks. She was on a quarter system; eight to nine weeks was almost the entirety of an academic quarter. For Bailey, the delay felt like a ploy to get more money out of her, as she was paying for quarters where she would receive no feedback, and where she did not feel like she could advance on her degree. "I was paying full tuition to sit in limbo. It's one of the main reasons I stopped. I can't be paying you $4000 for ten weeks of hearing nothing," she said. It is possible this was connected to the fact that Bailey's doctoral institution was for-profit; delaying graduation may have led to increased revenue.

Xavier shared a story about working with his advisor after requesting a time limit extension. When he requested his extension, the department agreed, as long as he and his advisor developed a feasible timeline. He worked all summer to complete a draft. He then had two recently graduated classmates edit two drafts of the first chapter. After their edits, he submitted it to his faculty advisor much earlier than their agreed-upon timeline required. He did not receive any feedback for two months; after he asked for feedback,

he was told he should not proceed until he got feedback, since he would likely need to rewrite the first chapter. When he finally received the feedback, two weeks before he was to submit the second chapter, he found contradictory comments all over it, with a note that he should work with two recently graduated students to rewrite it: the same two graduate students with whom he had already worked. When Xavier got his feedback, he was stunned and unsure of how to proceed. He decided to speak with the chair of the department, whose response was simply that Xavier had two choices. If he was not going to abide by the deadline, he could either resign or be dismissed from the program. Xavier resigned.

After Xavier left his program, he saw that the leadership in the school had rotated and a new person was the dean. He decided to speak with the new dean about the possibility of continuing in the program. After evaluation, the new dean said if his former advisor was willing to take him on again, he could continue. Xavier was absolutely not interested, knowing he could not work with that advisor. In fact, the advisor submitted a letter in response stating Xavier was a substandard writer – feedback he said he had not received at any other point in his doctoral process. He felt if he had received the feedback earlier, he would have been able to work on improving his writing; to receive it now simply seemed vindictive and inaccurate; and considering the decline of the relationship with his advisor, to be expected to work with that advisor again seemed completely impossible.

Trish was preparing for her oral comprehensive exams when she ran into frustrations with her doctoral committee. She was supposed to get feedback from her committee a week in advance, in order to adequately prepare for her exam. She only

received one set of feedback on time, and the remaining feedback only two days and one day prior to the exam. The feedback ranged from questions to bulleted lists to complete frustration with the document.

> One of the four hates everything I've written and rips me apart in few words. To the effect of I forgot I was reading graduate level work…No real, no bulleted suggestions, or what the problems were. It was just this sweeping 'this is really bad' kind of statement.

When Trish had her oral exam, she failed. "Everything that they had told me to prep for didn't happen…nobody brought up major writing problems, nobody brought up super bad things," she said. When Trish received her feedback after the exam, she was simply told she did not show mastery of the literature, but she did not feel she got any useful feedback from her committee about what that meant. "The one example they could give me was that when I pulled up this resource, I didn't tell them who it was. I didn't cite the author's name." Further frustrating Trish was the experience of one of her colleagues a few weeks later. Her colleague, who had the same advisor, had also taken time away from the program, and said herself that she did not feel like she should have passed, but that she was able to regurgitate answers provided by her advisor. "I felt set up. I felt like somebody came in determined that I wasn't good enough to pass," she said.

Lack of Transparency

Many participants expressed a lack of transparency regarding program structure, requirements, resources, and opportunities. In addition, there was often confusion regarding how the program was designed and what requirements were in place at the departmental and institutional levels. Others were not aware of available support resources when they were floundering, or did not learn about opportunities, such as research assistant positions, within their program. Because they were not aware, they

could not benefit from opportunities designed to help students succeed. Often outside forces impacted departmental decisions, such as faculty retirements and new faculty hiring, and students were not provided the information they felt they needed to make the best decision for their needs.

Many participants expressed frustration at opportunities they were not aware of that others were able to take advantage of. For instance, Trish's department provided opportunities for students to research, write, and publish with faculty members, but Trish had never been informed these experiences were options. "It just very clearly seemed like there were people that they had taken under their wing, and that was really never me," she said.

In addition, participants expressed a lack of clarity regarding comprehensive/ preliminary/qualifying exams. Mark felt unsure of what to expect as he prepared for his qualifying exams. Faculty would make statements such as, "There have been a number of quals [qualifying exams] that just haven't met my expectations." Mark was frustrated because he was not sure why the qualifying exams had not met the expectations of the faculty member, nor did he know what he could do to complete qualifying exams successfully. Mark did not pass his qualifying exams on the first attempt. He did retake the exams, but said his ensuing pass was anti-climactic.

Ignatius shared some concerns regarding the comprehensive exam process as well. She referred to her experience as a form of hazing, designed as a rite of passage rather than a needed academic exercise.

> Comps became this huge overwhelming thing where you locked yourself away for a week without any contact with family, friends, or anybody, and you just sit there and write. I don't know how helpful that is. Or how realistic that is.

Trish was similarly frustrated with her preliminary exam process, which consisted of three research papers. Trish's advisor shared there were some minor issues in her papers, but that she could overcome those during her oral defense. Her advisor told Trish exactly what to prepare for, and told her she would be fine at the defense; Trish failed her defense. Participants also felt they received negative feedback at critical junctures that they had not previously received. For example, Xavier received feedback that he was a poor writer late in his program, yet had not heard his writing was bad at any other point. Carol and Xavier were asked to do multiple rewrites to appease their advisors and members of their committee, yet neither was clear on why these rewrites were necessary, other than their perception of politics among the committee members. They felt these rewrites negatively impacted their progress. In fact, Xavier also referred to much of his experience with the dissertation as "unequivocally hazing." "The only intention was because she had gone through it before, and she puts her folks through it," he said.

Skyler explained that her program assigned academic advisors as students began, but the person she was assigned was not necessarily going to be her dissertation chair. Skyler reached a critical point in her academic progress where she had been working on her introductory and methodological chapters of her dissertation. She needed to get approval from her advisor in order to proceed to the second comprehensive exam in the program, and needed to pass the comprehensive in order to begin her research the following fall semester. Skyler's advisor was not happy with her methodology and was not willing to sign off on her chapter. Her advisor would not allow her to sit for her comprehensive exam until the rewrite was complete. Skyler said she understood her future chair may indeed want her to restructure the research, but did not understand the

urgency to do so prior to comprehensive exams. Skyler's anger about her advisor's request led to her inability to complete work, and Skyler left shortly after that point.

Trish was placed on academic probation during her program due to incomplete grades as a result of her health issues during her first year. Trish felt the decision was inappropriate since her grade point average would be above the posted requirements when grades were submitted. Her program faculty admitted her GPA was above the requirement, but kept her on probation because they did not feel she was progressing fast enough, which frustrated Trish, because the definition of "progressing fast enough" did not seem clear to her. She also expressed frustration when she was given incorrect information from her department. "I would get one answer from an advisor, and I would go to the grad school and say 'Is this right?' And that would piss them off," she said.

One interesting result of Bailey's graduate study was that she earned a certificate of advanced graduate study in her program. Her institution granted these certificates to students who completed specific courses in education; however, Bailey was not aware of the certificate prior to receiving it. "Literally, one day the diploma showed up in the mail," she said. Bailey explained she did not know what had happened, and had not been working toward anything other than completing her doctoral program. Certainly, Bailey was appreciative of the certificate, but did not understand what she had done to earn it.

Francine felt the program left her to fend for herself after her initial advisor left the institution. She had specifically applied to that program because there was an advisor working in an area she wanted to study. Because of her own experiences as a graduate program coordinator, she assumed, "perhaps erroneously," she said, that people applied

to a specific program because they intended to study a specific area with a specific person.

> Through no help of anybody else, I found my own advisor. I was really disappointed that I was the one that had to go to do that legwork. It wasn't a sense of entitlement…but there was not the support from the very beginning to sit down and talk with you about what you are interested in…there was a complete lack of advising until you figured out what you wanted to do, and you figured out who the people were who did that, and you had to track them down, and nobody else helped you, nobody else said, 'Hey, talk with this person.'

Francine didn't feel the program was trying to intentionally teach self-efficacy or self-authorship skills; rather, the program staff expected them to figure it out on their own.

Scott felt outside forces such as hiring freezes or retirements were impacting departmental decisions, though the students were not privy to how those decisions were being made, which contributed to his decision to leave. Scott's institution underwent a hiring freeze, while most of the faculty decided to retire. Only two faculty members would remain in their positions, neither of which Scott felt comfortable with as a dissertation chair. "At some point, we would have more faculty members; we didn't know if it would be in six months or three years," he said. When he told a classmate he was leaving the program, she responded, "Do you think that we would have come here if we had known what it would be like?" The clear insinuation was that the department was experiencing significant unknowns.

Location

Location became a factor for four participants during their doctoral experience. Specifically, participants found it challenging to communicate with faculty and current and potential committee members when they were not located in the same geographic area as the graduate school. Carol, Mark, Bailey, and Amy took jobs in distant

geographical locations while in their doctoral programs, and initially felt they would be able to complete most of their degree requirements remotely, since they had all finished coursework. Bailey was already in a low-residence program, so her move had fewer implications beyond financial.

Carol attended an institution on the East Coast, and moved to the Mountain West. She travelled between locations because she was committed to completing her degree. Shortly after she moved, one of Carol's committee members retired, and another member left the institution. At this point, Carol had recently completed her proposal, and had been approved to move on to the next phase of her research. The committee members' departure meant she needed to find new committee members and ensure the entire committee was on the same page regarding the direction of her project. However, as she searched for new committee members, Carol found it hard to form relationships, especially with faculty with whom she had not spent time in the classroom. She was eventually able to find two new committee members. Unfortunately, the new committee members did not agree with the previous members regarding study methodology, and Carol was asked to redesign her study significantly, changing her methodology and study structure. Carol agreed simply because she wanted to finish the degree. She believed her location significantly impacted her ability to negotiate with faculty regarding their expectations. In addition, she felt like she was no longer important to anyone in her program, and that there wasn't anyone who was invested in her completion. In fact, on one occasion when Carol flew out to her doctoral institution for a scheduled meeting, her advisor was surprised, stating that her assistant was supposed to call Carol to cancel the appointment. Carol was incredibly frustrated. She had purchased a plane ticket and flew

halfway across the country to make the meeting; rescheduling to the next week was simply not an option. After a bit of back and forth, her advisor agreed to meet with her on a weekend. When they finally met, her advisor had forgotten she was "the one from [the West.]" From that point on, Carol included in every message that she was not local. "It was just one of those things where I was not important anymore, and I was paying," she remarked.

Mark expressed similar concerns about the inability to meet in person with his advisor because he had moved too far away to commute to campus. However, Mark noted location was a factor for many of his colleagues that completed the degree. "Most everybody I know who finished, did so physically there," he said. "If you were there, then you could find someone who cared, and then you could get your study refined, and then you'd get done." Conversely, Amy recognized her departure would likely mean she would not continue. "Even if I didn't know it at the time, I think subconsciously, I absolutely knew that it was going to be a factor."

Finally, as full time professionals, four participants moved far away from programs that they had, in part, chosen due to their geographic locations. With the exception of Bailey, who was in an online program, the other three participants who moved felt their programs no longer cared whether they finished the degree, and had already written them off when they chose to move. Even though all three fully expected to complete their degrees after their move, it was easily apparent when they left that the program faculty were not committed to supporting them to completion.

Importance of Advisor/Advisee Relationship

Six of the fifteen participants (Becky, Francine, Mark, Skyler, Trish, and Xavier) directly cited their advisor as a primary reason for their departure, and three other participants (Bailey, Carol, and Phoebe) mentioned frustration with their advisor in some capacity. Many of these participants expressed a belief that higher education and student affairs programs espoused a value to "meet the students where they are," but this was not enacted in their own experiences as students. In other words, there was hypocrisy between what was taught in the classroom as foundational for working with undergraduate students, and what these graduate students felt they had seen in their own doctoral experience.

One-third of the participants did not feel their advisors were invested in their success. These feelings manifested in a variety of ways including frustration over completion of requirements and a distinct implication that advisors did not care whether they continued in the program.

Xavier wished he had realized that changing advisors was an option. His frustration with seemingly inane requirements, such as additional literature reviews and arbitrary topic changes from his advisor led him to a realization:

> I was a number to them. I was not a person to them, and even when I tried to invest myself, they were not invested…my advisor was not invested in me. When I figured that out, it just didn't matter.

He felt the ending of his program was belittling and frustrating, but he also recognized that the blame for departing the program was solely placed on his shoulders. "I accept responsibility," he said, "It's not her fault I didn't finish. I could and should have thought about changing advisors…I clearly demonstrated I wanted to, and she did not

reciprocate." He felt he had shown his desire to complete the degree by completing additional literature reviews and exploring other topics when requested, but did not feel his advisor actively supported his completion of the program.

Mark initially really enjoyed his advisor. He and his advisor presented together at a national conference on research they had conducted regarding student transitions, which was one of Mark's proudest accomplishments in the program. Unfortunately for Mark, his advisor left for another institution (though his advisor did notify Mark before he left). He was assigned a new advisor, but he felt like he did not receive much guidance from his new faculty advisor. He would receive messages that things needed to be completed. While he appreciated the reminders, he still felt he was not receiving enough guidance to know what he should be doing. Mark felt his distance from his program combined with an advisor that was not bought in functionally led him to decide to depart from his program.

When participants told their advisors they were considering leaving the program, they received interesting responses. For example, Beverly responded:

> Even from my advisor, there wasn't really ever a point where I felt like anyone was trying to convince me to stay. It was more like 'Okay, you seem to have come to this decision. What do we need to do to make this more realistic?' I never felt like anybody was like 'It would be such a loss if you left.'

Beverly said, at the time, she did not think she would have been open to defending her decision. However, when reflecting upon her departure, Beverly was surprised no one tried to convince her to stay. "They put a ton of effort into selecting certain students. Did it not matter to anyone that I was having a bad experience?" She felt like she might have exuded decisiveness, but she was still a bit hurt. "I think it would have been nice to hear something about my value to the program, or about what I could bring intellectually,

what would I be missing by not doing that?" she said, "Why didn't they try just a bit harder to get me to stay?"

Phoebe's experience with her own advisor was unique. She mentioned that her relationship with her advisor was strong in the sense that they felt a connection, but not necessarily a great fit for progression in the degree. For example, Phoebe knew her advisor from before she was admitted to the program, and they were friends. She found herself engaging in friendly conversation when she met with her advisor rather than discussing her progress in the program, which led her to feel lost. Phoebe eventually realized she needed someone who was a bit more directive, someone who intimidated her a little bit. After changing advisors, Phoebe felt like she made much better progress.

When considering departing from the program, Phoebe was nervous to tell her new advisor. She had a regular meeting scheduled and emailed her shortly before the call explaining why she was ready to be done and would be leaving. Her advisor immediately called her, and they discussed Phoebe's decision.

Often, participants cited perceptions of positive advisor/advisee relationships as a primary reason why their colleagues completed the degree. Mark spoke of a friend at another institution who had an advisor call her when he had not received anything.

> You owe me a chapter. And I want it. Because what do you think I'm going to do this weekend? Go out to a movie? And have fun? I don't do that kind of thing. You owe me a chapter. Hope life is well. Call me.

His friend shared with Mark that when she called her advisor back, he was supportive, but also pushed her to send what she had completed and finish the necessary work. Though it would certainly not be reasonable for a faculty advisor to call each doctoral student and beg them for their work, Mark felt like his friend had someone at a critical juncture to help push her forward. "When things aren't going right, you gotta have

somebody. There's gotta be somebody that reaches out and says 'What's going on?'" Mark said his colleagues were certainly driven, but most importantly in his mind, they had somebody who cared. Carol felt similarly. "They had faculty members who were committed to their completion. They were there, in their face, they were in the same town, and they got down," she said.

Participants felt like they saw positive examples of advisor/advisee relationships that helped other students to succeed. For example, Mark spoke of a friend who completed the doctorate with a newborn at home. "She had an advisor that told her 'you're bringing in the baby, aren't you? Bring the baby, and if you need some help, bring his stuff from the car,' and they would get together." Trish felt other members of her cohort had different experiences with the faculty in the program that helped propel them toward degree completion, saying there were "favorites" among the faculty in her program.

Challenges with Committee

Though the advisor/advisee relationship was certainly a critical component of the decision to depart, participants' experiences with their doctoral committee also impacted many of their decisions. Mark and Carol both experienced faculty departures from their doctoral committee that forced them to bring in new people. Trish also experienced issues with communication with her doctoral committee.

Mark's move, combined with faculty departures, made it difficult for him to find committee members. "The folks I'm looking at as committee members, I've had none of these people for class…I don't know them that well," he opined. Carol went through numerous changes after pulling her committee together. Two of her committee members

left, and the new committee members felt her methodology needed to change. Her methodologist actually changed another time after that, and she ended up writing her methodology chapter three separate times. The repeated rewrites angered her, as she felt she was wasting her time dealing with the faculty politics – "whose methodology was right, who was the new chair coming in?"

Participants expected their programs to provide committee members committed to student success, yet most interviewed felt their programs did not do so. These concerns did seem exacerbated for those participants attending part time; they were more likely to discuss a lack of mentoring in a variety of capacities. This may have had to do with their limited time in direct exposure to the academic program. Interestingly, in a field known for providing opportunities for undergraduate student success, most participants felt their needs were not met and programs were not designed for their success. Mark summarized well when he said others graduated simply because they had someone who cared. Other participants echoed the sentiment; they simply wanted people who cared. They did not expect to be nurtured or coddled throughout the doctorate; rather, they simply wanted to feel like they mattered to the institution.

However, faculty likely believed students in the program bore significant responsibility to ask for what they needed. For example, students who needed to make a geographic move during the course of their program also needed to understand the many demands placed on faculty time and the importance of clear, consistent communication when working from a distance. Within the advisor/advisee relationship, faculty and students may not have made their expectations of one another clear, and students may

have been making unreasonable expectations of how long quality dissertation editing can take.

Personal factors

Though most participants did not feel that personal factors were the main cause of their departure, they did play some role in their decision. Typically, the personal factors were coupled with an external factor that seemed to exacerbate the internal. The primary internal factors that seemed to affect participants were related to self-confidence, or the belief in their ability to succeed in the program, along with drive and discipline, or the focus and determination to complete the degree – or lack thereof.

Lack of Self-Confidence

Multiple participants expressed concerns about their ability to make it through the program. Francine felt like she was unable to translate her self-confidence in her professional role to her own classroom space. She thought others who completed the degree must have been more confident in their abilities than she was in her own. "I just really lacked that confidence that I could finish the program," she said. "These people around me seemed to know exactly what they were doing. And if they didn't, they at least were able to pull off that they did."

Francine's professional role involved a significant amount of interaction with her doctoral advisor in university meetings.

> It was really awkward, where I was a peer during the day and treated as such, but in the evening, I was a student…The weird part about it was that the confidence I had during the day about my skills and my abilities to manage the program that I was, did not translate into the classroom. I knew what I needed to know to do what I was doing during the day, and I knew I could help these individuals, and I knew that I had the answers, and they knew that, but it just didn't transfer into the classroom.

The disconnect between Francine's desire for a competitive program and her lack of self-confidence as a student seems contradictory. Francine struggled with feeling confident she could complete the work necessary to earn the degree. Her lack of confidence coupled with the change in her advisor's research interests, led to Francine's departure.

Phoebe was one of the older participants, and she started her program a little later in life. She felt like her lack of experience in technology perhaps meant she was too old to be pursuing the degree. She felt "really dumb" and intimidated by others in her program.

> I really felt tongue-tied around people that I perceived were so much more on the ball than me. That's not like me. It's like every bit of self-confidence I had felt just went out the window. I think I really let that get to me. I just felt like I'm just not as good as these other people.

Phoebe had worked in the field longer than some of her colleagues had been alive, but she still felt like she knew nothing, demonstrating a lack of confidence in her work and in her performance in the classroom. However, both Phoebe and Francine were in "highest research activity" universities according to Carnegie classifications; this may have impacted their feelings of imposter syndrome as well.

Lack of Drive and Discipline

Drive to finish the degree, or lack thereof, was another important attribution for attrition among participants. "I just didn't have the drive to finish it, and I didn't want to just go through the motions if I really wasn't committed to it," Jackie said after the birth of her son. Amy was feeling burned out in her program, and got to a course designed to help her complete her literature review. During that course, Amy found it more and more difficult to complete the readings and do the research; she ultimately asked for an incomplete in the class. While self-motivation is certainly important in completing a

doctorate, Beverly felt her program in particular required students to be intrinsically motivated since there was little to no support programmatically for students to complete.

Phoebe worked full-time while studying, and found she was struggling with self-discipline, stating, "After you've been working all day, and if it's been a stressful day at work, then I have to read five chapters and write this review. I had a hard time disciplining myself." Similarly, Beverly's distaste for the material led to her recognition that maintaining the self-discipline necessary to work alone with no schedule, no classes, and no one checking in was not a recipe for her success.

Personal Challenges

About one-third of the participants experienced a familial struggle that impacted their ability to pursue the degree. Since doctoral students in education are often older, it follows that many are facing significant challenges as members of the sandwich generation, or those responsible for their own children and for aging parents, and participants certainly cited these responsibilities as having an impact on their decision to depart. However, their programs did not seem to be able to provide options when these unexpected life circumstances arose. In fact, Bailey was asked to complete additional classes and retake comprehensive exams because she had taken a year away from her program. However, Bailey was frustrated because her year away was due to her desire to be with her medically fragile newborn, and there was not a policy in place to address her health-related absence. She did not feel a year absence merited retaking the comprehensive examinations.

Many participants talked about finding ways to balance the requirements of their doctoral programs with their commitments to their families. Some simply spoke of their

families when discussing how they were able to complete parts of the program, while others mentioned familial struggles that affected their ability to complete the degree.

Bailey did not even start her doctoral work until about ten o'clock at night, so that it would not cut into family time. She also tried to keep one day each weekend free to spend time with her spouse. She discussed the differences between completing her master's degree and doctoral degree:

> I did graduate school right out of undergrad with a cohort, full-time…completely different than my doctorate. What was totally different was that I had a spouse, I had somebody else to think about...I went from a master's program where my main focus was being a student to a doctoral program where I would have loved to have the focus of being just a student, but I was a wife, a senior student affairs administrator, and then a doctoral student...And then when I had a kid, [school] became the fourth thing...and it fell right off.

Skyler shared she had been a non-traditional student from the beginning of her experience in higher education. She had been a mother and spouse throughout the course of her academic career, working while completing her degrees. She would often stay up until one or two a.m., waking up to be at work by eight each morning. Like Bailey, she set aside one day each weekend to work on her doctoral work and the other for family. "It's temporary, and it's just three years, so…. suck it up," Skyler said to her family. She also set clear expectations for her family. A little further into her program, in the span of about nine months, Skyler went through a divorce, took in an ailing parent (with whom she had not previously had a positive relationship), and her child was sent to prison.

Similarly, Carol dealt with ailing parents during her doctoral program. Her mother was diagnosed with cancer right after Carol moved out West, and ultimately passed away during the time that Carol was in school. Her mother's illness caused Carol to stop out of her program for a time, and when she returned, she felt she had to do a lot

to get people reinvested in her research. Shortly after, her father also faced health issues, and it became too much for Carol.

> It was trying to manage what was going on with my family. My dad was in such a terrible place that it made no sense for me to put my studies as a priority, but at the same time, I was a wreck. It's one of those things where you have to admit to yourself that you can't handle stuff.

Phoebe dealt with parental illness as well. Phoebe's parents lived close to her, so she spent quite a bit of time managing their illnesses and needs. "I just felt like my mind wasn't in it. It was after my father died…I just said, 'This is it.' I decided I [couldn't] focus and do this."

Scott's situation was significantly different from Carol and Phoebe's situations. Shortly after moving to the location of his graduate school, Scott learned that his partner did not like living in that area. They were living in a town that was smaller than his partner was used to, and they were 1500 miles away from their closest support system. Scott's partner was quite unhappy in the area, which, along with the uncertainty in Scott's program, played into Scott's decision to depart.

Impact of Departure

Participants all said they began their program with the intention of earning the terminal degree. All admitted their departure impacted their lives in some capacity. Departure was not always seen as a negative experience for participants; in fact, most participants experienced both positive and negative impacts from their departure. Even though many participants expressed frustration with systemic issues within their doctoral programs, most departed feeling like they had made the right choice to leave their program.

Relief

One-third of the participants cited feelings of relief when they decided to leave their doctoral programs. When Bailey decided to leave her program, she immediately felt less stressed. Amy also felt relief when she decided to take an incomplete in a course. She initially intended for the incomplete to be a temporary break, but she quickly realized when she moved to a new location that the break was going to be permanent. When Phoebe spoke with her advisor about leaving the program, she also immediately felt a sense of relief. Francine's decision to transition into and complete the master's degree caused the pressure and expectations she had of herself to ease almost immediately. Mark also felt relief when he chose to leave his program, but also dread at telling others. One of his mentors said, "Well, I hate to see you give up." However, he felt like the time and effort spent on the degree was worth it, and he was grateful for the skills he learned and the opportunities he had as a doctoral student.

Intent to Return

Four participants (Amy, Mark, Francine, and Skyler) have considered returning to doctoral study, but not at the institutions where they were previously enrolled. Amy expressed interest in potentially returning for a terminal degree, but would consider other programs that might be a better fit. Mark is also actively applying to doctoral programs, feeling limited in his job searches since he does not have the terminal degree, yet he has advanced graduate study. Francine is not currently applying, but recognized her experience working in a highly competitive graduate program significantly impacted her perceptions of what culture should be like in her own doctoral program, and led to her departure.

> I've had to think about how much of that was an unrealistic expectation. In hindsight, I think it was an unrealistic expectation for that particular doctoral program I was in, but not for some of the programs I would aim to get into in the future.

In addition, Skyler has transitioned to a new job at another institution since leaving her program, and has considered beginning a new Ph.D. program in her new location, especially since the tuition would be free.

Right Decision to Leave

Over half of the participants ultimately felt leaving their programs was the right decision. When Beverly decided to leave, she was relieved, but also worried about the next steps. She recognized the program was not a good fit for her, despite her preparation before entering. Though she does occasionally find herself envious of others who have completed the degree, she still feels it was the right choice to depart. Beverly also found comfort in the shared experience with others who have decided to depart. "I feel like there is some solidarity among these people who have left Ph.D. programs." Francine also felt like her decision to depart led her to other great opportunities.

> It was the right decision. It was a well thought out decision, I think. It has allowed me to pursue some things professionally that I don't think I would have been able to, because I wouldn't have been in a position to leave a doctoral program.

Jackie was quite positive about her departure. When I asked her about life after the doctorate, she responded, "You know, this is terrible, but I actually didn't think about it." She was enjoying her time with her son. While she said she should have just finished the degree, she just did not have the drive to do so. Since her departure, Jackie has considered going back to finish her degree, but is unable to do so because she is past the time limitation. If she did decide to pursue a doctoral degree, "something would have to give, and I'm not sure what that would be."

Phoebe also felt like she made the right decision to leave, though she finds herself wishing she had the "wherewithal" to finish the degree. "I'm the same person now that I would have been if I had gotten the doctorate," she said. She also spoke about worthiness.

> I still want to feel worthy because I'm worthy. I don't want to feel worthy only because I was able to get a terminal degree…In my career, I've made a lot of contributions and I have benefitted so greatly from being in this field. I'm happy with it, and I don't want this one little thing to scar that for me.

Renee was similarly positive. She shared she was grateful for the opportunity to pursue interesting topics and consider alternative perspectives, and did not feel any sort of remorse about her departure.

Scott found his departure a bit of a challenge, but also felt it was the right decision. He left the program without employment, and ended up searching for almost half a year for a position. He credited his challenges in finding a job partially to the economy, but also partially due to employers feeling he was overqualified for entry-level positions. There were also limited mid-level positions for Scott to pursue. He mentioned if he chose to do so, he can return to his program, since he did not begin the dissertation process, and thus, his time clock had not started. He admitted he has considered transferring to another doctorate program, but worries about finding the time necessary to successfully complete the program. Ultimately,

> It was the right decision for me and my family at times. It was challenging at times, especially as my cohort members progressed and they have all within the last three years or so defended their dissertations. Recognizing that if I had stuck with it that I would be there with them. But I also recognize that again, I made the right choice. Things worked out how they were supposed to work out.

While Carol's decision to depart was in anticipation of being asked to leave, Carol still feels she is a strong practitioner. "For me to be on the other side and know that I'm still good anyway is a good feeling. I don't need the degree to know that about myself."

She has also been significantly involved with scholarly activities after leaving her program, much more so than any other participant expressed. However, she does worry about the time when she is no longer able to do those things because of her lack of terminal degree.

> It's just the process of how long I can do this until someone says, 'We can't have you here anymore because you don't have a doctorate.' Which is the next question. Do I go back? I don't know how to answer that question.

She reflected further, and while she has considered returning and completing the degree, she did not feel it would be a good investment of her time, money, and effort.

Similarly, while Ignatius' departure was somewhat forced by her program, she had many positive things to say about her experience. After determining she was no longer interested in moving up in administration, Ignatius has moved out of higher education. "I wish I could have finished, but I'm okay with where I am right now," Ignatius said.

Bailey wished she had never started her program, and said that she had not seen any of the benefits she hoped for as a result of her degree. Bailey currently works as a senior student affairs administrator, without the terminal degree, and is very happy in her current position. However, she is frustrated with the loan debt she incurred as a result of the doctoral program.

Frustration

Carol shared her perspective about doctoral attrition prior to leaving her program. It just felt like part of the process as she watched others leave the program without finishing. "Which is kind of fascinating because you kind of felt like you were better than everybody else, then when it happens to you, you're like, 'I'm a jerk too!'" She was

frustrated regarding her own departure, though. "I feel like I did so much and I still wasn't able to be successful," she said.

Francine was frustrated when new faculty began in her program. A few months after she transitioned into the master's program, new faculty began working in the program, and Francine really connected to those new faculty as mentors. "It was this realization as the relationships with my mentors developed, it was that 'Wow, this was the way that it was supposed to have been. I could have been in a doctoral program.'" She admitted a bit of regret and grieving at this point, but still ultimately felt positive about departing.

When Skyler left the program, she had so many other things happening in her life that she said "I didn't really care. I just didn't give a shit about that." Now, she finds herself resentful of the program and the people in it. She shared a story about running into her former advisor at a party of a friend, and becoming very upset. She said she spoke briefly to that advisor, but felt no compassion or care, effectively shuttering any chance she would return to that institution to complete her degree.

Xavier was the most frustrated and upset about his departure, saying it had a horrible effect on his career and emotional state. He shared that he felt it had limited his opportunities for advancement. "Without the Ph.D., I'm not a suitable candidate. The experience should matter a ton. But, without those initials next to it, I was not considered," he said. When asked directly about what life was like after leaving, he responded, "Bitter. It was really bitter. I'm still bitter, as you can tell, I'm really bitter now. And that was six years ago." He talked about his frustration that the classes placed a significant focus on helping students learn, figuring out student needs, and identifying

the gaps that exist and the opportunities to help students persist; yet, the faculty seemed not to care about these issues related to their own students "To have our instructors so distant as faculty from what they were teaching…the more frustrated I am with the hypocrisy."

Disappointment, Shame, and Regret

Other participants felt disappointment, shame, and regret when they considered the impact of their departure. When Amy realized her move would ultimately mean her departure from the doctoral program, she admitted disappointment and regret that she could not finish the degree. However, she also felt it was the right thing to do for her career in the long term. Similarly, Mark was disappointed he did not complete the degree.

Trish had heard about people starting doctoral programs and not completing them. "I was convinced that's not going to be me, but you know…life happens," she said. Trish shared she mostly is "totally okay" with her departure, but occasionally feels like a failure. She expressed disappointment, not in herself, but that the program did not turn out the way she had hoped in the beginning. Though she certainly experienced frustration and anger toward her departure, she also found an article shortly after leaving that has helped her reframe her departure in a more positive light: "Life happens, and what you thought your priority and where you thought you headed when you started has changed, and this is what's best for you." While Trish could still return to her program,

> I don't think I will finish…I think for my own sanity and mental health sake, I don't know that I have the fight in the department left in me, in a place that I really don't feel supported. And that I don't feel like I want to celebrate that accomplishment with any of them.

Becky left her program feeling like she still had something to complete. "I've never started something I haven't finished. Until this," she said. Becky felt like she did not have closure on her program departure.

> To a degree, I made a conscious decision to leave the program, but in a way I didn't, because I was at a stalemate. For me, it wasn't like I sat down and had a thoughtful conversation with myself about leaving the program. It was more like I felt the decision was made for me.

Unfortunately for Becky, her advisor's departure, and the program's lack of assistance in finding a new advisor meant that she really did not have another option at that time.

Shortly after Phoebe decided to leave her program, her initial feelings of relief turned to shame. She shared she was concerned about how others would feel.

> On the one hand, I was relieved, because I had taken me out of the situation that I didn't want to be in. On the other hand, I felt ashamed because of what people would think. Would they think I was incapable of doing the work? Would they think that I was just dumb? Would they think I had no aspiration? What would they think?

This was challenging for Phoebe to grapple with.

Positive Framing of Others' Departure

An interesting thread throughout the participant stories is that they almost exclusively frame the departure of others as positive. Even if the participants felt the others left due to similar reasons, they talked about the choice of other departers in a mostly positive light. For instance, participants often felt like many of their colleagues who left did so in part, at least, due to goal changes. A friend of Mark's had an opportunity to pursue an executive doctorate, and he encouraged her to pursue that opportunity instead. An executive program would allow her to earn the terminal degree more quickly, and was supported by her employer. Phoebe saw colleagues leave because they were content with where they were, and did not want to go through the rigmarole of

the degree, while Ignatius' friend failed her first comprehensive exams and decided not to take the allowed repeat. For Beverly's friend, the program's focus on producing faculty ended up being a bad match for her desire to go into administration. For those Trish knew who had departed, she felt it was because they simply reached a point in life where it no longer fit, for whatever reasons. Participants also felt like others who finished the degree may have had more specific goals relating to the doctorate. "I absolutely had colleagues that wanted to be doctors," Bailey said. "That was important to them…they want the doctorate for the doctorate." Phoebe felt like those who finished did so "because they have a goal in mind." Their positive focus on the departure of others was interesting when coupled with their own perceptions of the impact departing had on their own lives. For the other people who had left, departure was seen as a positive experience with no negative effects, yet some participants experienced negative effects from their own departure.

Participants were quick to credit their colleagues who completed the degree. "It's just doable. As long as you're focused on it, and you're doing the work, it's doable," Skyler said. Ignatius noted after completing various hurdles throughout the program that completing the degree was no longer about ability, but rather about perseverance. Their classmates had proven the ability to complete the degree through the hurdles, and they simply stuck to it until they finished.

Conclusion

Participants expressed numerous factors that led to their decision to depart from doctoral programs in higher education and student affairs. Participants cited inflexible degrees, program/participant goal conflicts, issues with communication, programmatic

challenges, negative department relationships, and personal factors for their departure. Though not every situation was surmountable, participants often felt there were many things the program or institution could have done to help them complete the doctoral degrees. They believed their programs could have developed additional support for part-time students and options for flexibility for all students. They wanted programs to be clear about the goals and intended outcomes for graduates, and they wanted clear, concise, and correct communication, regardless of where they were located. They needed programs designed to support all students from admission to graduation, with clear expectations for faculty and students alike. They required strong relationships with advisors and committee members that were committed to seeing them complete the degree and cared about their success. They understood personal factors contributed to their departure, yet attributed their departure to systemic problems. Finally, they generally believed their departure had impacted their current lives in a number of ways.

Generally, the findings supported previous doctoral attrition literature. However, participants placed more emphasis on the theme of inflexibility and the subtheme of challenges with their doctoral committee than previously seen. The challenge of inflexible programs was not a surprise given the population of students who choose to pursue the doctoral degree in education, but challenges with doctoral committees was a stronger concern for these participants than previous literature suggested.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

When I embarked upon this research study, my goal was to answer the question "To what do people who voluntarily depart from doctoral programs in higher education attribute their departure?" Three primary factors necessitated this study: the interdisciplinary nature of higher education and student affairs administration programs, the common goal for many attending higher education and student affairs programs to pursue administrative positions upon completion of the degree, and the demographics of those attending higher education and student affairs programs. These three factors demonstrated the uniqueness of higher education and student affairs doctoral students, calling into question the extent to which previous research on doctoral attrition is applicable to this population. Generally, this study did find previous research applicable to students in higher education and student affairs programs with some caveats specific to the population of students who pursue terminal degrees in higher education, such as the propensity for part-time study and full-time employment, or the desire for career progression as a primary motivator rather than tenure-track faculty positions. The aim of this study was to better understand through interviews the reasons doctoral students in higher education and student affairs programs chose to voluntarily leave their programs. By using an attribution theory framework (Weiner, 1972), I considered how participants

determined who influenced their decision to depart, how the factors leading to their decision changed over time, and how their behaviors affected their decision to depart. In understanding why people choose to leave their doctoral program, prospective and current students, higher education and student affairs programs, and graduate schools can consider opportunities and challenges to help students reach their desired outcome.

Discussion of Findings

Through conversations with participants, I learned some of their reasons for departing from their doctoral programs in higher education and student affairs. For example, participants were particularly impacted by the perceived inflexibility of their doctoral programs, which makes sense given the part-time nature of study for much of the population involved. The impact of the committee also seemed to be stronger for these participants.

Previous literature (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001) on doctoral attrition has been almost exclusively focused on students who attended their programs full-time. However, the simple reality of higher education and student affairs doctoral programs is that many are designed to allow students to attend part-time. Previous explorations of doctoral attrition did not share the voices and experiences of part-time doctoral departers, so much of the information shared by participants in this study provided new insight into those experiences. Though I did not sample to find part-time students, almost all participants attended their programs part-time. Participants who attended their programs part-time shared challenges with inflexible programs more often than those who attended full-time. They also expressed similar challenges previous studies found for full-time students such as challenges with their advisors (Gardner,

2009a; Lovitts, 2001). Given the nature of students who pursue doctoral programs in higher education, it was not unusual to find so many part-time students. A limitation of this study, though, is that the number of part-time respondents was not intentional by design, though it may lead to future research focusing on part-time HESA doctoral students. Though many of their responses were similar to previous research that focused on full-time students, their perspective as part-time attendees added a new voice to the literature on doctoral attrition that merits further investigation.

Even though twelve out of the fifteen participants said it was the right decision for them to leave, many still felt negatively about their departure in some capacity. This spanned from a feeling of nostalgia, almost a "what if…" type of thought process, to at least one participant actively applying to a new program for the upcoming fall semester. Regardless of the person's reasons for leaving, walking away from the degree meant that many participants felt like they had something left to do, or that they wish they had done more to complete the degree. However, previous research on doctoral attrition often approaches attrition as a failure on the part of the student to complete the task. In fact, when considering doctoral attrition and persistence, many researchers discussed completion of the degree as a success, and the decision to depart as a failure. Though there were certainly significant impacts to many when the participants chose to leave their doctoral programs, most of these participants did not see their decision to depart as a failure on their behalf. I do not believe this reframe is something I can solely do as a researcher, but I hope by sharing these stories, it helps to normalize departure as a possible positive option for doctoral students to consider. The terminal degree is not a fit for all, and coming to the decision to leave a program without completing the degree does

not have to be seen as negative. Many of these participants have been highly successful after choosing to depart, some even earning the jobs they aspired to prior to beginning the degree.

Attribution Theory Analysis

Analyzing the data through the lens of attribution theory also provided perspective on how participants attributed their departure. As a reminder, attribution theory is used to explain how individuals make sense of their behavior and events in their lives. Attributions are categorized along three dimensions, including locus of control, stability, and controllability, and can be focused on internal characteristics or factors of the situation or environment (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Some of the participants may have been caught up in external factors of frustration and unable to take any responsibility for their departure.

Locus of Control. Often, participants in this study did not believe they had control over the outcome of the events in their lives as they related to doctoral study. Rather, they tended to see their lives as being externally controlled by luck or fate, or other forces beyond their control. Some participants did express personal factors that led to their departure, as well as misalignment of program and participant goals. However, these attributions of departure were almost universally seen as happening to the participants, rather than something they could control or change their own behavior and activities in response. This was similar to Weiner's (1972) research, where people attributed their failures to situational factors rather than their own ability. Participants seemed to believe they did not control their departure.

Personal factors. Similar to previous attribution theory research (Weiner, 1972), participants rarely attributed their departure to internal factors such as skill or effort. In fact, many spoke about having the academic ability to complete the program. Skyler and Ignatius both distinctly felt completing the degree was within their academic ability, but for the hurdles they faced. This discrepancy was interesting, as an outsider may have perceived the hurdles Skyler and Ignatius felt as signs they were not academically capable of completing the degree. Skyler and Ignatius both put the onus of their departure on those hurdles rather than considering how they might have maneuvered around those situations.

One participant, Phoebe, was the only one to express feelings of inadequacy related to her abilities to pursue the doctoral degree. Certainly, those struggles with self-confidence echo previous literature on imposter phenomenon (Bernard et al., 2002; Craddock et al., 2011; Langford & Clance, 1993; Leary et al., 2000). In addition to these struggles with self-confidence, Renee also struggled with her ability to make change and advocate for her students. Her disillusionment with higher education and her belief that pushing for change was useless led to her decision to depart. Renee's fatigue in working toward change efforts were clearly evident in her frustration.

Participants also did not seem to engage much in self-advocacy throughout their programs. Very few participants discussed actions they took to try to change perceived inequities or access resources others had available; they seemed to expect to receive things passively. Often, participants spoke of events that led to their departure as something that was done to them. For example, an advisor did not get them the feedback they needed, or their advisor simply left the program. Participants rarely followed up a

comment like this with any sort of discussion of their own role or how they might have followed up to get needed feedback.

Even when participants cited internal factors they could influence, such as their choice to start a family, for their departure, they still primarily attributed their departure to things that happened to them. This was especially interesting given previous research that said those who departed were more likely to take responsibility for their attrition (Lovitts, 2001). In fact, these participants were more likely to cite others leaving their programs as a sign of a problem with the structure of the situation, not as a product of their own deficiencies. Perhaps this was due to the overarching view that departure from the doctoral program was not a failure for these participants.

Misalignment of program and participant goals. For many participants, choice of program affected the alignment of their program's goals with the participant's personal goals. While choice of program seems on its face easily a factor participants influenced, many participants felt the programs they were able to choose from happened to them. In other words, the programs available were simply luck and not affected by the participant's hard work, attributes, or decisions, and the locus of control was external. Only four participants moved to begin their doctoral study; most chose a program that was geographically and/or financially desirable. For these participants, the locus of control seemed to be more internal; they actively made decisions in their search for academic programs, and their own hard work and attributes affected the programs for which they were competitive. They did not mention any consideration whether the program focused on preparing people for faculty roles or for roles in senior administration, though most participants spoke about the desire to pursue the degree for

professional advancement rather than career realignment. With the exception of one participant, their primary goal was not to achieve a tenure-track faculty position after completing the degree; in fact, twelve participants specifically planned to remain in student affairs administration after finishing (the remaining two participants were open to either possibility).

For some participants, they felt like they fell into doctoral study. For these participants, it may have been better for them to stop and reflect on their goals, and to thoroughly investigate the focus of the academic programs they were considering. In many cases, it may have been a better decision to postpone doctoral study until they were able to find a program that met all of their needed criteria in terms of program goals, geographic desirability, and financial assistance. In addition, programs should not have been expected to change their goals, but perhaps the programs could have been more clear with the participants when they were prospective students; did they provide all of the information necessary for participants to determine if the program was a good fit? Were participants who clearly expressed an interest in remaining in student affairs administration admitted negligently to a program with a focus on developing potential faculty members? While the program's primarily goal may not have been to produce faculty, there are certainly many programs known for producing high quality candidates for academic positions. There are certainly pressures to enroll many students in graduate programs; it is worth considering how these pressures affect admissions decisions. It would also be worth examining the socialization these participants experienced when they began their doctoral programs. For example, a program with professed goals of preparing the next generation of faculty members may actually unintentionally display a

culture and identity that conflicts with these professed goals. Students in the program may plan to continue in student affairs administration, and even though the program's intent is to produce faculty members, the students may perpetuate a past culture of scholar practitioners (Gardner & Mendoza, 2010; Lovitts, 2001). When these participants were interacting with their peers, faculty, and alumni, important attributes about the field of higher education were shared, and these participants continued to develop their own professional identity (Weidman, et al., 2001).

For participants who pursued a Doctor of Philosophy degree, many did not seem to recognize this degree is typically not intended to be a practitioner degree, but rather a degree to prepare researchers and those who intend to engage in scholarly practice. However, the lack of true clarity and differentiation between the Ph.D. and Ed.D. likely influenced many of these participants. The assumed prestige of the Ph.D. (Toma, 2002), as well as the availability of the Ed.D. degree (Osguthorpe & Wong, 1993) likely impacted participant decisions as well. Finally, participants did seem to recognize incongruence between their own goals and the goals of the program they had chosen to attend. However, they attributed these incongruences to luck or fate, rather than to their own decisions regarding choice of program. They did not seem to take responsibility for their choice of program, or choice of degree.

Stability. As a reminder, the stability dimension of attribution theory focused on whether causes changed over time (Weiner, 1972). For all participants, they felt the causes that lead to their decision to depart changed throughout their time in the doctoral program. They all began the degree fully intending on completing it and the various causes for their departure all either had a trigger point or were exacerbated during their

studies. This included goal shifts during their program, family, and department relationships.

Goal shift during program. With regard to attribution theory analysis, goal shift during the program fell under stability primarily because the shift occurred after beginning the doctoral program. For many participants, they began their doctoral degree interested in what would often be referred to as alternative academic, or alt-ac, careers. Student affairs administration is a common alternative academic career, but many participants did not seem to be aware of other opportunities with the terminal research degree. Francine was the only person who mentioned think-tanks, or policy and research institutes, as a possible option. However, her referral to these was related to her surprise there was no connection between her institution and these opportunities. This was not surprising, as prior research also expressed a lack of cohesive career services support for doctoral students, and specifically a preference to admit students who intended to become faculty members upon graduation (Golde & Dore, 2001; Lehker & Furlong, 2006).

In Beverly's case, she realized she was no longer interested in moving on to a faculty position. Having chosen a program focused on preparing aspiring faculty members, Beverly then recognized her goals no longer aligned with the goals of her program, and decided to complete the master's degree instead. Beverly knew she needed to make a change, but her international student status complicated her departure more than other participants experienced, as she could not simply decide to stop without significant consequences.

For Amy, her frustrations with her doctoral program combined with her desire to make a change in her professional life led to her goals shifting away from completing the

doctorate. This desire to go in a different direction echoed Lovitts' (2001) research, though previous research indicated this goal shift tended to happen either early or late in doctoral study; Amy departed in the middle of her doctoral program.

Family. For some participants, family life shifted through their time in the doctoral program, causing instability. Bailey, Jackie, Skyler, and Ignatius balanced the challenges of parenthood while in their doctoral programs. For Ignatius and Skyler, they negotiated these challenges throughout their entire time in their doctoral programs, as both gave birth prior to starting the degree. Bailey and Jackie both became pregnant and gave birth during their program, and in different ways, considered the birth of their child as critical to their decision to depart. Bailey was dealing with medical bills and time-consuming doctor appointments, and said, "Something's gotta go, and it's not going to be your kid." For Skyler, the challenges that arose within her family coupled with the frustrations she had with her program simply meant she was no longer interested in doing the work for the degree.

Participants in this study did not feel their families were the cause of their decision to depart. Previous research expressed the impacts significant others and families of doctoral students had on the decision to depart (Gardner, 2009a; Hawley, 2003), yet with the exception of Scott's partner's dislike of the geographic area they had moved to, the families of these participants did not seem to be a contributing factor to the participants. However, this is incongruous with some participants' stories about choosing to devote time to family over their academic responsibilities.

However, caregiving, either for children or aging parents, did seem to be a factor in the experience of doctoral education for many of the participants. Almost half of the

participants, exclusively women, discussed caregiving as a factor in their challenges with doctoral life. Researchers have begun to consider the impact of family formation on degree pursuit for women (Rossman, 1995; Spain & Bianchi, 1996; Valian, 1998). There are many expectations of women as caregivers that do not seem to be similarly applied to men (Lynch, 2008; O'Reiley, 2004), and these expectations may have subconsciously impacted the decision to depart for some participants in this study as well.

Department relationships. For those participants who believed their relationship with their advisor or doctoral committee was influential in their decision to depart, this was not something they could have easily foreseen prior to beginning their program. It seemed like many of the advisor/committee-student relationships started out well, but became difficult for students when their advisor or committee would provide challenging feedback that may have been different than previously received feedback. For example, Xavier felt confident in his writing skills when he began the program, but his advisor did not see him as a strong writer, which became problematic for their relationship. These changes often lead to instability in relationships that were foundational to academic success in the doctoral program.

Though certainly an outlier, Becky's experience with the sudden unannounced departure of her advisor significantly impacted her experience. This aspect certainly changed during her doctoral study, as Becky indicated significantly positive feelings about her doctoral experience prior to her advisor's departure. Previous research did not address the departure of advisor as a reason for the decision to depart from a doctoral degree, though some correlations could likely be made regarding unavailable advisors or

the quality of advising students received (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Gardner, 2009a; Pauley, Cunningham, & Toth, 2000).

In addition, when Carol experienced the departures of multiple members of her committee, these challenges coupled with her recent move further destabilized her relationships with faculty in the program. Carol felt like the changing politics of the department were often dictating how she could proceed in her degree. Similarly, Mark's committee changed membership multiple times, and he did not feel confident in the relationships he had with the new committee members, as he had minimal interaction with them prior to seeking out their participation on his committee. These challenges with committee were different than previous research which seemed to focus on the relationship with the advisor and minimized the impact a committee might have.

Controllability. The feeling of being able to control aspects of behavior affected participants in this study. This came across in communication issues, as well as participants' feelings regarding the inflexibility of their degree. Participants often felt like their advisors were unable or unwilling to communicate with them; since the participant could not make the advisor communicate with them, they often resorted to a sense of 'why bother?,' and feelings of defeat. Because the participants could not control how others would react, they often felt their efforts were futile.

Communication issues. It was interesting to hear participants discuss frustration with communication. All participants who mentioned challenges with communication felt like these things happened to them. No participants mentioned how they attempted to clarify questions about comprehensive exams or the dissertation; rather, they spoke about how they did not understand many of the faculty requests they were receiving for

rewrites, or delays in progress. Trish did attempt to clarify some of her questions regarding graduate school requirements, but when she did so, her advisor would get frustrated with her when she returned with correct information from the graduate school. It was not clear if the information her advisor was providing was outdated or simply incorrect.

In addition, most of the participants who moved during their time in the doctoral program felt they had control over their move; they felt their advisors and committees were responsible for many of the ensuing challenges with communication. However, faculty often find it easier to track students who are physically present or persistent in their communication. Generally, it seemed like participants expected strong communication, but did not always advocate for their own needs or make clear their meaning of strong communication.

Clearly, communication between students and faculty was important to all participants during their doctoral programs. Participants expected timely feedback so that they could continue to progress on their degrees, yet some did not experience this. Additionally, participants expected clear and honest communication from their institutions. Their frustration when they were unable to participate in growth opportunities was evident. Again, many participants felt like other students received a different education with more opportunities.

It was understandable that many participants expressed frustration with program exams and the dissertation. Both exercises are often confusing, even for students who complete the degree (Lovitts, 2001). The participants' programs seemed to view the students responsible for understanding and preparing for the exams and dissertation, yet

the participants often felt there was no way for them to know what they did not know, so they felt ill-equipped to ask questions that would help them understand the process and prepare appropriately.

The communication challenges many of these participants faced often affected their ability to graduate. Though there were aspects of the communication issues portrayed that the students could control, there were often aspects they could not affect. Mark did try to reach out to his faculty advisor through phone and email, yet found the effort was not reciprocated by his faculty advisor. In Becky's situation, with an advisor that left the university, she tried numerous times to get in contact with her faculty advisor, and was even given incorrect information in these attempts. Previous research has indicated the importance of a faculty advisor who is accessible, supportive, and frequently interacting with students to degree progression and completion (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007). In addition, placing the full responsibility for interaction on the doctoral students often led to confusion, a lack of direction, and lack of understanding of how to proceed (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Holsinger Jr., 2008; Lovitts, 2001).

Inflexibility of the degree. In previous research, faculty viewed the subthemes of health, family, job and time limits as the student's responsibility to manage (Lovitts, 2001). However, many participants felt there was a shared responsibility for these subthemes. They understood they had a responsibility to manage their time and health, but also felt the program and institution had responsibilities they did not fulfill in providing flexibility due to life circumstances. Participants did not feel their departure was due to experiencing a health crisis or a challenging family matter; they chose to

depart because they did not feel the program was willing or able to accommodate their needs, and they could not control that response.

In addition, participants felt time limits set by their programs affected their ability to complete. Previous research has indeed addressed the impact of time limits on doctoral attrition and completion (Lovitts, 2001; Malmberg, 2000). Time to degree has often been considered one of the strongest indicators of student success (Malmberg, 2000); students who were in their programs for longer periods of time were less likely to complete the degree (Bair, 1999). Smith et al. (2006) also found lack of graduate program flexibility to be a factor for doctoral attrition, citing that while some students may succeed within those parameters, other students perceived the programs as uncaring and depart; that perception was echoed in this research. Though there may have been mechanisms for petitioning for an extension, these were not always accessible or applicable to a student's situation. In Mark's case, reaching his time limit meant he needed faculty support to petition for an extension. Because he was no longer at the institution, and many of the faculty he had worked with had left the program, he felt like there was no one who cared enough to help him complete the degree. This hampered his ability to petition, as he did not feel any faculty would be willing to do the work necessary. In his case, he felt like he tried to influence the outcome and work toward completing the degree, but could not affect the responses of others.

In addition, people may be more likely to attribute success to their own skill and failure to the situation they are in (Weiner, 1972). Often, participants did not feel their decision to depart from their doctoral programs had anything to do with their own abilities, but rather due to bad luck or tasks that were more difficult than they needed to

be. They experienced many changes throughout their programs that affected either their desire or ability to proceed with the degree, and they believed many of the challenges they faced were beyond their control. This may have been a type of coping mechanism, to associate these factors as something they could not manage. If so, it is not surprising they did not attribute their decision to depart to their own abilities.

Implications for Practice

These findings provide numerous possible implications to practice for prospective and current doctoral students, higher education and student affairs doctoral programs, and graduate schools. In considering opportunities to address the realities, positive and negative, of doctoral attrition, those in higher education and student affairs can make decisions for the betterment of the field. In addition, we can begin to normalize positive reasons for doctoral attrition that do not consider those who make the decision to depart solely as failures.

Prospective and Current Students

Prospective and current students have many considerations they must make as they decide to pursue and subsequently begin doctoral study. Prompt attention to these considerations will help students to ensure they understand the massive undertaking they are about to pursue. In addition, by researching already available resources, students can benefit from the knowledge of those who came before, whether they completed the degree or chose to depart.

Considerations. Those interested in pursuing higher education and student affairs doctoral programs should know that not everyone completes the terminal degree, and that not completing the terminal degree does not mean the student is a failure. One

way to do this would be to create opportunities to normalize departure. For example, the Student Affairs Collective (2016) recently published a blog series on the student affairs doctorate. As I read blogs throughout the month, I quickly recognized a gap; no one discussed the possibility of departure. Because of my research work on doctoral attrition, I submitted a short blog discussing the possibility one would decide not to finish the degree.

Each participant expressed a desire to complete the degree at the start of the program, and each participant experienced challenges that ultimately led to their decision to depart. Though none of the participants completed their degree, they did not see themselves as failures. Prospective and current students should seek out stories of those who have chosen to leave their program by networking within and outside of their program, and being open to hearing from students who completed and those who made a decision to depart.

Prospective students also need to understand the terminal degree is not designed to be a credential or career checkbox; it is designed to be an academic exercise of the highest order. As such, prospective students truly need to understand the purpose of a doctoral degree and the expectations of high scholarly activity. Even a simple web search on "purpose of a doctoral degree" will provide a wealth of information from a variety of perspectives on the purpose of the terminal degree. Prospective students should also spend significant time reflecting on the substantial new task they are considering adding. For some of these participants, it appeared they either had not considered the formidable additional tasks they were taking on, and for others, they understood those tasks, but unexpected life events arose during their pursuit. If a

prospective student is not willing to make sacrifices in other areas of their lives to accommodate a massive undertaking such as a doctoral degree, it may not be the right fit at that time. There are no known ways to add more hours into a day, so there will certainly be negotiation and balancing of new priorities when pursuing a doctorate. As an example, my role as an undergraduate academic advisor involves many orientation presentations where we clearly outline our expectations for study time needed to be successful in our majors. However, I did not receive similar advising when I began my doctoral program; it was assumed I knew what to do because I had been a student before. However, it was my first time being a doctoral student, and I did not have a good sense of the expectations of my faculty. Students should be required to attend orientation, and presenters should encourage students to clearly ask questions about the amount of time expected on coursework and research in each semester.

Finally, doctoral students need to be flexible. Retirements and departures are inevitable in higher education, and students will decide how to react when those departures come about. For some doctoral students, the departure of an advisor will simply lead to the student's departure from the doctoral program. For others, they will need to be flexible to work with a different advisor at their institution or to reconsider their research interests. They may need to work with faculty who do not share their specific interests, or work with advisors with whom they have no classroom experience. For some of these participants, the advisor/advisee relationship became problematic, and students were often unaware of or unwilling to pursue alternative options.

Best practices. Prospective students must carefully consider their program choice, given their parameters. Geography and financial support are certainly concerns to

be aware of, and prospective students should also consider the goals of the program, the faculty employed by the program, and the institution fit. In addition, prospective students should ask programs about their completion and attrition rates, including characteristics of students who completed and left the program. Are almost all of the students who left the program part-time students? This is certainly an important consideration if a prospective student is planning to attend on a part-time basis.

In addition, prospective and current students need to seek out as much as possible on their prospective/current program. Current students also need to take responsibility for knowing academic policies. They should know where to find those policies pertaining to graduate students, and should advocate for themselves when they are facing challenging situations. Many of the communication issues cited could begin to be addressed by students understanding and using the resources they have access to, such as department chairs, student government, or university ombudspersons. Students should seek out departmental and institutional handbooks, publicly available information, and course catalogs. In addition, students need to self-advocate and ask questions. For some students, they will need to seek out mentorship and knowledgeable members of the community and not assume their advisor will have all of the answers.

Additionally, many resources exist online regarding best practices for graduate students and their research advisors. Though many of these are designed to be institution-specific, astute graduate students can glean many best practices that apply across institutional contexts. For example, North Carolina A&T State University provides best practices for doctoral students. Their tips include meeting with important departmental staff and faculty, completing foundational courses, scheduling meetings

with advisors, and paying all required tuition and fees (North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, 2017). Though their tips mention specific resources to the institution, they can provide a launching pad for students to consider what they need to do at their own institution. Blog resources such as the Student Affairs Collective (2016) also occasionally offer blog series focused on the doctorate degree in student affairs, or #sadoc, and most of the participants in the blog series welcome questions and comments from those interested in their experiences as a doctoral student.

Higher Education and Student Affairs Doctoral Programs

Higher education and student affairs doctoral programs can also benefit from the findings of this study. Each participant involved was committed to completing the degree when they began their pursuit, yet met obstacles along the way. Doctoral programs have many considerations and best practices that may assist in doctoral student retention.

Considerations. Though programs cannot act without regard to institutional requirements, programs should consider their population of students and advocate for university policies and procedures that do not disenfranchise their students. For example, this could involve developing a protocol for students to take an approved leave of absence that would not count toward program time limit. These leave policies are a newer trend in higher education, and often come with many implications that may or may not make them a feasible choice. In addition, programs should consider the implementation of a culture or policy that would allow for last minute absences without penalty. Students in a variety of caregiving roles would significantly benefit from this flexibility. In Bailey's situation, family leave would have allowed her to manage the needs of a medically fragile child without feeling like her program was simply trying to

make money off her. It may also address departures such as Jackie's, and allow a parent to spend time with a newborn, or Phoebe's, Becky's, and Carol's, to manage the challenges associated with caring for ailing parents.

Another possible consideration for programs in higher education is the feasibility of adding a professional graduate academic advisor. The competing priorities of faculty often make it difficult to manage admission, retention, outreach, and career development in addition to their university mandated priorities of research, service, and teaching (Krush & Winn, 2010). A professional graduate academic advisor could focus on tracking student progress toward graduation, reviewing student records, and addressing potential pitfalls. In addition, when students are as ingrained in an academic department as they are in graduate school, having a professional to manage the necessary (and unnecessary) bureaucracy of graduate school timing and deadlines would likely help students clearly understand timing, requirements, policies, and procedures. For many of the participants, a trusted professional with clear knowledge of the institutional and programmatic requirements, as well as knowledge of campus resources, would have been invaluable in assisting participants in completing their degrees. At the undergraduate level, there has been a shift toward professional academic advising, with a clear goal of retaining students (Krush & Winn, 2010; Selingo, 2014). Though there are significant costs associated with this recommendation, such a process could immensely benefit graduate departments as well.

In a similar vein, faculty need to carefully consider a number of factors when admitting students and pairing dissertation advisors and committees. Many institutions limit the number of advisees any doctoral advisor can have, and for good reason. To

develop a strong relationship with advisees and to provide the needed feedback to doctoral students in a timely manner is no small feat. While a faculty member may be interested in a number of projects, or in working with particular students, faculty overextending themselves through involvement in student committees negatively affects the faculty member, as well as the students involved through delayed response time, confusion regarding project and scope, and a feeling of not mattering to the faculty member. These factors also may lead to faculty burnout and dissatisfaction, though that is out of the scope of this research. While it is certainly challenging to determine how to balance the desire and, in many cases, need to admit more students with recognition of the current faculty availability, such considerations would likely address many of the systemic concerns participants experienced. However, there is not an easy answer to these competing priorities. Programs can, however, be transparent about the workloads of faculty and how that affects student progress. Often it seems like faculty are overworked, but students are not aware of the level of responsibility each faculty member has. Transparency can help students understand why their flexibility is needed and appreciated.

Programs should also assess the goals of prospective students, and do a better job of aligning program goals with admitted participants. Given that many participants did not feel they had much choice in program, the institution should bear some responsibility for admitting people for whom the program design is a fit. In other words, a program designed for future faculty members in higher education is not well served by admitting students who fully intend on remaining in student affairs administration; similarly, students are not served by being admitted into a program that is not designed to meet

their needs. To a certain extent, the statement of purpose required for many programs does address this; however, many participants felt like they were open with their administrative intentions yet left their program due to, in some part, the feeling that their interests and skillset were not being valued. When interviewing prospective students, faculty also need to push questions that help them ascertain if the potential student understands what a Ph.D. is designed to do.

Best practices. It is rare for a doctoral program to have empirical evidence of why students depart without completing the degree. It seems most data is anecdotal, from individual advisors or word of mouth. Higher education and student affairs programs should institute a mechanism to assess student departure, ideally by a non-partisan professional outside of the department. It may also be an automatic survey, though I would caution programs to consider when and how the survey is administered. A survey sent immediately after a student chooses to depart would likely not truly allow the person to provide honest and reflective feedback about their departure, and may further disenfranchise someone who left under duress. In addition, some programs may see such minimal departure that a survey not carefully administered will directly tie the answers to a person, limiting their perceived ability to share challenging experiences. The use of a non-partisan outsider would hopefully allow students to provide honest feedback about actions the department may have taken that negatively impacted the student and led to the decision to depart. Collecting student feedback is an important step for programs to see where their expectations could be made clearer, and to address systemic issues that have led to the departure of multiple students. Many institutions have developed outreach to non-registered undergraduate students; putting something

similar outreach in place at the graduate level would likely provide empirical evidence for program assessment.

Programs should also create or maintain open dialogue about what an advisor should do. Carol and Mark discussed their perceptions, both sharing they did not feel their chair "fought" for them with their committee. By providing an opportunity to dialogue about expectations, students and advisors can better understand the rationale for the advising they receive. Skyler shared with me "Programs are designed for your success. Your success is the program's success. When you go in to defend that dissertation, don't forget, you have already been prepped and set up for 100% success." I found this perspective interesting, given the frustrations Skyler experienced with her own advisor and program, and also recognized the importance of this perspective; a program should not allow a student to defend if they have not been set up for success. Certainly, this is not a guarantee a student will pass the exam/proposal/defense, but preparing a student for these should be a shared endeavor between faculty and student. It may also be helpful for programs to provide clear options for students at each step of the doctoral program. For example, a brief document outlining steps to take when there is a disagreement with an advisor, or how to approach asking for clear feedback.

While there are certainly arguments students should know how to find out resources on campuses, higher education and student affairs programs should recognize this is a shared responsibility. It is easy to assume students in HESA programs would have significantly more understanding of how universities work and how to find resources than a typical graduate student, but it would be irresponsible of faculty to

remain unaware of where to find resources and policies; especially those that apply to graduate students.

Additionally, higher education and student affairs program faculty would also benefit from many of the resources proposed to prospective and current students, including institution-specific guidance for graduate students and advisors. For example, East Carolina University Graduate Council (2015) produced a document for their faculty outlining best practices for dissertation advisors, including student policies as well as expectations of faculty throughout the doctoral process. Additionally, the Council of Graduate Schools published a manual entitled *On the Right Track: A Manual for Research Mentors* (King, 2003) outlining responsibilities for graduate faculty in working with students on their research.

Graduate Schools

Finally, graduate schools set policy for programs across the institution. However, current policies often do not consider unique populations across the university. Graduate schools can also benefit from the findings of this study and make an impact in supporting doctoral students across the academy.

Considerations. Graduate schools should consider the rationale for policies and procedures related to time limits. While time-to-degree is a strong predictor of graduation in doctoral programs, it is not clear to what extent time limit restrictions impact this finding. In other words, if students reach their time limit, in some programs, they are no longer able to graduate. If the time limit were not in place, would these students be able to graduate in a longer time frame? This was especially pertinent for part-time students participating in this study. Their already slow degree progress was

hampered by additional life experiences that arose as they pursued the degree. In addition, undergraduate degrees typically do not have time limits; what is the rationale for time limits at the graduate level? What responsibility does or should a graduate school have to ensure students finish in a timely fashion? Graduate schools do have a responsibility to provide mechanisms that guide out students who are unable to complete the degree; they also have a responsibility to ensure graduates are competent in current discipline knowledge and practice. The ability to complete the doctoral degree in a timely fashion can also be affected by several factors, including individual demographics, financial support, ability, and motivation (Abedi & Benkin, 1987; Ferrer de Valero, 2001). In Abedi & Benkin's (1987) early study, students who supported themselves were likely to take longer than average to complete the degree; many full-time employed participants in this study experienced similar struggles in timely progression.

As a doctoral student myself, I have questioned the rationale for some of the policies and procedures with which I have worked – at both my doctoral institution and the institution at which I am employed. The time limit at my doctoral institution is eight years, while the time limit at my employer is ten years. There is no publicly provided rationale for the time limit currently in place, and both seem to be arbitrary lengths in order to set a deadline. In addition, the programs vary in what happens when a student reaches the institutional time limit. My doctoral institution requires a petition to continue in the program, and in my experience, limits such petitions to one year extensions. However, my employing institution's time limit is specific to courses counting toward the degree. Students who have taken longer than ten years to complete their degree must petition the Graduate School to include coursework more than a decade old, and the

petition must include a plan to finish the degree, but programs are not terminated at this point. These confusing points show a need for transparent policies in graduate education.

Finally, graduate schools need to work with the institution to develop contingency plans for retirements and departures and their effect on graduate students. These departures are inevitable for any employer, but there often seems to be a disproportionate effect on graduate students, as they work much more closely with faculty members. The hiring cycle for faculty members can often span an entire academic year, yet administrative positions are typically hired much quicker (Zackal, 2014). Advocating for an acceleration of these hiring processes would significantly benefit graduate students as well as remaining faculty in the department, as they would not be placed into situations where they are overworked and not able to give students (and themselves!) the time they deserve. For participants in this study that were affected by faculty departures, this would have provided many other opportunities for potential advisors instead of placing additional burden on already overworked faculty members.

Best practices. Another possible opportunity would be to consider a graduated time limit model, such as the one in place at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Students at UCSD have three time limits for doctoral programs: pre-candidacy limit, support limit, and total time limit (Regents of the University of California, 2017). The institution also has policies regarding parental leave and methods for petitioning the time limit policy. Such a graduated policy could possibly maintain both the university interests in producing competent and current graduates with students' need for flexibility.

The importance of the advisor-advisee relationship in doctoral education cannot be underestimated, however most faculty do not receive any training in how to advise

doctoral students; they simply rely on how they were advised as doctoral students. Graduate schools should develop advisor trainings for all faculty who will be advising doctoral students, explaining the importance of clear and accurate communication with a student throughout their doctoral degree. In addition, graduate departments should have clear guidelines for what constitutes good academic advising for master's and doctoral students. Though departments differ in how students are socialized to the realities of the academic field, the graduate school also bears some responsibility for ensuring graduate students are provided opportunities for success. The use of a university-wide advising syllabus may be a way to outline clear expectations for graduate students as well as doctoral faculty and committee members, while providing individuals the opportunity to make their expectations disciplinarily appropriate (Trabant, 2006).

Future Directions for Research

Previous research explored the experiences of underrepresented populations in doctoral education, as well as the importance of doctoral attrition for these populations (Golde & Dore, 2001; Smallwood, 2004; Rendón, 2003). The participants in this study were fairly homogenous in background and diversity. Though I cannot make any assumptions of how this research would be different had there been more diversity among participants, it does provide a limitation to this study and a direction for future research. For example, do women experience their decision to depart differently from me? Does age impact the decision to leave a program without completing the degree and, if so, in what ways? How do race and socioeconomic class impact these decisions?

While this study focused on the general experiences of doctoral departers, future research could look at individual populations within higher education and student affairs

programs. For example, do women experience their departure differently from men? Does age impact the decision to leave a program without completing the degree and, if so, in what ways? How do race and class impact these decisions?

Further, this study focused on those who had left their doctoral programs. My initial survey reached many people who were not eligible to participate because they were still enrolled in their program. While they were screened out for this study, a future direction for research could involve those who are considering leaving doctoral programs, and possibly work towards developing interventions or graduate transfer strategies.

Another important area of inquiry relates specifically to the experiences of part-time doctoral students in higher education and student affairs. Though this study primarily consisted of part-time doctoral students, this was not an intentional design. Such an intentional design could include more discovery into the impacts of being a full-time professional while attending graduate school on a part-time basis.

Future researchers should also consider the differences in program choice between prospective students interested in becoming faculty versus those interested in remaining in administration. Are prospective students interested in becoming faculty members more likely to attend a full-time program? Do they choose programs based on the school's competitive rankings? How much do students who plan on going further in administration consider program goals when choosing a program? How are students impacted by choosing to enroll in a doctoral program at their own institution? In addition, how do these decisions manifest in Ed.D. programs versus Ph.D. programs – are there differences or not?

Another possible direction would be to consider the institutional and departmental marketing materials themselves, and to understand how prospective students and current students view these documents. Do current students believe those materials adequately and accurately tell the story of the program they are attending? Do prospective students find the information they need to make informed decisions?

While previous research does indicate the importance of faculty relationships within the department, there is an opportunity for further research on the impact of the relationship between students and their doctoral committees. Participants in this study cited these relationships as having an impact on their desire and/or ability to pursue the degree, yet this relationship has not been investigated. How do doctoral committee members affect students? What is the advisor's role within the doctoral committee? Is it the advisor's role to "fight" for their student, as Carol and Mark expected?

Further, the variance in graduate school policy causes concern, and would be another avenue for future research. A future researcher could consider academic policy at the institution and how it applies to graduate students. Does it meet the needs of a relatively unique population, or is policy written to benefit a specific type of graduate student. For example, what academic policies exist to address the needs of new parents? How are time limit policies applied to graduate students, and for what benefit?

In addition, the use of attribution theory reflected on what participants felt led to their decision to depart. The questions were designed with this theory in mind, and got at some interesting aspects of the participants' perceptions of their departure; almost universally caused by negative factors, but generally not seen as a failure. Future research could consider doctoral attrition from a variety of theoretical lenses that might

provide interesting perspectives. For example, a future study might delve into feminist theory to analyze gender inequality in the experience of leaving a doctoral program in higher education. Another study might consider doctoral attrition through the lens of student development theory, such as a study that might focus on self-authorship and its relationship to doctoral attrition.

Conclusions

As mentioned earlier, I embarked on this study out of sheer curiosity – why would people begin a doctoral program in higher education and not complete the degree? Especially if they had the academic ability to do so, and were not asked to leave by their program? How did they view their departure from their doctoral programs? It seemed like leaving a doctoral program was seen as a failure to complete by so many people, but I was not sure that was the case. After completing this dissertation study, I identify significantly with the Illustrated Guide to the Ph.D. (Might, n.d.), where the Ph.D. is graphically represented as being the pinnacle of knowledge, but merely a tiny blimp in the grand scheme of the world. I feel I have a stronger grasp on why people might choose to leave their program, but now I have so many more questions. My participants shared their experiences with me and the illumination it has provided has been immensely helpful, though. This study highlighted the applicability of much of the previous research on doctoral attrition to the field of higher education and student affairs, yet pointed out nuances of the field and how the part-time nature of study for many HESA doctoral students may impact their experiences. These stories help to provide insight into the attributions for departure of those who chose to leave without completing the degree, and provide opportunities for prospective and current students, higher

education and student affairs programs, and graduate schools to understand why people do not complete the degree. While there have been more and more studies on doctoral attrition, there are still unexplored areas of this topic. Hopefully, by implementing these recommendations and pursuing further research, prospective and current students, higher education and student affairs programs, and graduate schools can develop doctoral programs designed for student success, and relieve the negative stigma associated with choosing to leave a doctoral program without the degree.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

Institutional Review Board

DATE:	November 30, 2016
TO:	Sarah Maddox
FROM:	University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB
PROJECT TITLE:	[980702-2] Reasons for Attrition in Doctoral Programs in Higher Education and Student Affairs
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Amendment/Modification
ACTION:	APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE:	November 29, 2016
EXPIRATION DATE:	November 29, 2020

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

Sarah -

Thank you for your patience with the UNC IRB process. Your revisions and modifications clearly addressed all requested changes. Your protocol is now verified/approved exempt and you may begin your study. Please be sure to use all amended documents, scripts/posts, and protocols developed during this review process in your participant recruitment and data collection.

Best wishes with your research.

Sincerely,

Dr. Megan Stellino, UNC IRB Co-Chair

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT SCREENING SURVEY

1) Did you start a doctoral program in higher education and student affairs?
    a. Yes
    b. No (submit form)
2) Did you complete the doctoral degree?
    a. Yes (submit form)
    b. I am still attending my program (submit form)
    c. No
3) When did you leave your doctoral program?
    a. Prior to 2006 (screened out)
    b. 2006
    c. 2007
    d. 2008
    e. 2009
    f. 2010
    g. 2011
    h. 2012
    i. 2013
    j. 2014
    k. 2015
    l. 2016
4) Were you asked by your doctoral program to leave?
    a. Yes (screened out)
    b. No

   c. I was not officially asked to leave, but left in anticipation of being asked to depart.

5) What university did you attend for your doctoral program? (screened out participants from the University of Northern Colorado)
6) What is your racial/ethnic background?
7) What is your gender identity?
8) What is your sexual orientation?
9) How old are you?
   a. 20-29
   b. 30-39
   c. 40-49
   d. 50-59
   e. 60-69
   f. Older than 69
10) Can I contact you regarding this dissertation study?
   a. Yes
   b. No
11) If so, please provide the best email address to contact you with more information.
12) Name:

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about yourself, and how you got to where you are today in higher education.
2. What reasons led you to pursue a doctoral degree in higher education?
3. How did you go about selecting a program to enroll in?
4. What did a typical day look like for you when you were enrolled in your program?
5. What did you do differently as a doctoral student?
6. What supports did your doctoral program provide? Your doctoral institution?
7. Tell me about a positive experience in your doctoral program.
8. What was your proudest moment in your doctoral program?
9. Tell me about a negative experience in your doctoral program.
10. What factors led to you leaving your doctoral program?
11. What was life like after you chose to leave your program?
12. When reflecting now on your departure from your doctoral program, what feelings do you have about leaving your program?

APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY of NORTHERN COLORADO

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Reasons for Attrition in Doctoral Programs in Higher Education and Student Affairs

Researchers: Sarah Maddox, University of Northern Colorado

Email: maddoxsh99@gmail.com **Phone**:970-397-9416

Supervising Professor: Dr. Tamara Yakaboski **Email:** tamara.yakaboski@unco.edu

Purpose and Description: Though a certain amount of attrition can be healthy, many people are impacted by someone's decision to leave a doctoral program. After reviewing the literature, this study will explore reasons people leave doctoral programs in higher education prior to completing the terminal degree.

Interviews: Participants will take part in one semi-structured interview. The one-hour interview will be conducted in person during the Fall 2016 or early Spring 2017 semester; if we are unable to meet in person, the interview will be conducted via phone and audio recorded. This interview will focus on your experiences of why you chose to leave your doctoral program. You may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview if necessary.

All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. You will have the opportunity to use a pseudonym if you choose to help protect your identity in the study. After I have transcribed each interview, I will send it to you for your review to make any changes, corrections, or for your own personal information. This process helps me represent your experiences accurately and carefully.

Data Handling: All transcriptions will be stored on a password protected online cloud drive that only I have access to. All transcriptions will only include pseudonyms, and no other personally identifying information will be stored. Transcriptions will be recorded based on date of interview and participant pseudonyms. Audio recordings will be destroyed after completing the transcription. This project is my dissertation study so only I, and my doctoral advisor, will be reviewing the transcriptions. I will destroy the

information collected four years after the study is complete. You will be asked to create a pseudonym to protect your identity, as I place a high importance on confidentiality. Only you and I will know your true identity. I will refer to you as your pseudonym in writing and presentations.

Potential Risks: Participants may face emotional risks in sharing negative experiences related to their departure from doctoral programs. Additionally, participants may feel discomfort in speaking to a researcher who is proceeding forward with doctoral study while they chose to leave their program. To this end, I will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality, but cannot promise anonymity.

Participants may benefit directly from their participation in reflecting upon their experiences leaving doctoral programs. Participants may also benefit from the structured processing and reflecting opportunity they may not have had. While I am not a trained counselor and will not engage in counseling-like interviewing, the nature of exploratory questions may provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your decisions and this may provide meaning or perspective about those decisions. The field of higher education and student affairs will also benefit from what is learned from the experiences of doctoral departure, and these benefits may extend to other academic disciplines.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw from this study at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Sherry May, IRB Administrator, Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

_____

Participant's Signature Date

_____

Researcher's Signature Date